

CREATING THE CREDIBILITY GAP: MILITARY ADVISORY  
COMMAND, VIETNAM, AND THE MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT

CREATING THE CREDIBILITY GAP: MILITARY ADVISORY COMMAND, VIETNAM, AND THE MEDIA, by Major David C. Snow, 127 pages.

This study investigates the effects of public affairs policy changes on the military and media relationship during Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, the Military Advisory Command, Vietnam failed to follow US Army doctrine and regulations in dealing with the media. Throughout the course of the war, different organizations influenced policy changes that in turn had direct effects upon public affairs officers' ability to convey official statements to reporters. Public affairs policy decisions originated from both military command structures and civilian, political sources. As the war progressed, the military began to lose credibility with reporters, and this adversely affected their ability to influence how and when stories were conveyed back to the American public. Policy changes had a decidedly cumulative effect over time. Changes in policy were often accompanied by the realization within the public affairs and military command structures in Vietnam that reporters would not be moved from covering the war as they saw fit, yet these same military officers still acquiesced to the pressures of higher authorities and enacted policy changes. This dichotomy between the need to convey honest and candid information to reporters and their requirement to remain loyal to their superiors produced a media campaign that invariably failed to be effective. Future US Army leaders should always remember the consequences of losing faith with reporters and the effects this can have on their ability to relay important information to the public.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE THESIS APPROVAL PAGE .....	ii
ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
ACRONYMS .....	vii
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	viii
TABLE .....	ix
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background of Military Media Relations .....	3
A Changing Environment: Southeast Asia .....	7
MACV Organization: Its People and Influencers .....	11
The Importance of Media Policy Changes .....	12
CHAPTER 2. A VIETNAMESE AFFAIR .....	17
CABLE 1006, February 1962 .....	18
Max Candor, July 1964 .....	28
Maintaining a Low Profile, January 1965 .....	33
The Honolulu Conference, March 1965 .....	37
Summary .....	41
CHAPTER 3. SOFTEN THE BLOW .....	45
Downplay American Involvement, May 1965 .....	47
Painting a Rosy Picture, June 1965 .....	52
Zorthian's New Ground Rules, July 1965 .....	61
Summary .....	64
CHAPTER 4. IGNORE THEM AND THEY WILL GO AWAY .....	70
Let the Results Speak for Themselves, May 1968 .....	71
Vietnamization, January 1969 .....	74
Low Key Approach, August 1969 .....	81
News Embargoes, January 1971 .....	86
Summary .....	88

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	92
Results of Changing Military Media Policies .....	93
How to Apply the Lessons from Vietnam to Today .....	99
Current Military Doctrine .....	105
Recommendations for Future Operations .....	108
Conclusion .....	109
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	112
INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST .....	115
CERTIFICATION FOR MMAS DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT .....	116

## ACRONYMS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, US Pacific Command
CJCS	Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
CONARC	Continental Army Command
GDP	Graduate Degree Programs
MACV	Military Advisory Command, Vietnam
SGA	Small Group Advisor



## ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Figure 1. Different Types of media coverage during Vietnam .....	8
Figure 2. Total Number of Reporters in South Vietnam by Year .....	10
Figure 3. Organization of MACV Office of Information.....	11
Figure 4. Zorthian's Media Conclusions.....	102

## TABLE

	Page
Table 1. How Public Affairs Fits .....	107

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

White lies are at the other end of the spectrum from lies in a serious crisis. They are the most common and the most trivial forms that duplicity can take. The fact that they are so common provides their protective coloring. And their very triviality, when compared to more threatening lies, makes it seem unnecessary or even absurd to condemn them. Some consider all well-intentioned lies, however momentous, to be white.<sup>1</sup>

Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*

There is a belief that during wartime, presenting disinformation to deceive the enemy and support your own forces is reasonable and, if done for good reasons, justifiable. The Military Advisory Command, Vietnam (MACV), public affairs spokesmen's "white lies" and distortions about operations in South Vietnam began to influence their relationship with reporters. Taken individually, such well-intentioned white lies may have seemed innocent. These intentions were lost as time progressed and their numbers increased to the point where they formed a serious crisis in credibility.

Military public affairs policy is based upon the principle that, as stewards of public trust, Soldiers must be open and candid. Doctrine and regulations specify that this is to be the case. Numerous military leaders and presidential administrations confused this policy in relationship to the Vietnam War. The belief that distorting and suppressing facts to protect morale and public support was justifiable led to a conflict between the military and reporters covering the war. This conflict continues to have a lasting effect.

During a radio call-in show on 14 September 2005, KMBZ afternoon radio show host Jerry Agar commented, "I spent the day with students at the Command and General

Staff College who are angry with the media.” He had been present at a panel conducted at the school where for more than an hour, field grade officers from the US Army questioned three distinguished members of the American media. The theme of their questioning exposed an error in perception regarding the media’s purpose on the battlefield. Rather than accepting that reporters present events as they occur --for good or for ill-- these officers expressed surprise at what they perceived to be reporters’ failure to support the Army’s objectives. The media representatives on the panel, conversely, saw their role as a watchdog of the people, being objective in reporting events as they occur, and maintaining an investigative relationship with the military in order to find the truth.

This dichotomy of opinions was also revealed in a poll conducted in the early 1990s by the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, a nonpartisan foundation dedicated to free press and free speech issues. The forum found that 82 percent of military respondents thought that the media was more interested in negative stories than positive ones. More importantly, 91 percent of officers believed that reporters were more interested in increasing their audience than reporting accurately.<sup>2</sup> Even though these polls were taken several years ago, the discussions at the Command and General Staff College media forum indicated that a negative opinion of the relationship between the military and the media still exists.

Many within the military would attribute this antagonism to media coverage during the Vietnam War. If one accepts this point of origin for the animosity between the military and the media, it is important to understand how the military presented itself to reporters during the war. Official policy at the outbreak of the war was captured in military regulations. The later straying from published regulations had a significant

impact upon the way information was presented to reporters. The lessons learned from the military's media policy decisions during Vietnam can help officers of the present and future deal more effectively with the media.

Some historians have observed that as the war continued, increasing numbers of reporters thought that the war was unjust and sought out stories that supported their point of view. Regardless of whether or not this was the case, the significant point of many negative stories emanating from Vietnam and attacking American involvement, was not that they were written, but that the American military provided the freedom and access that enabled them to be written.<sup>3</sup> In the best traditions of our country, and despite any perceived antagonism, the military allowed and assisted reporters on the battlefield, even when it proved detrimental to its mission.

### Background of Military Media Relations

The relationship between the military and the media has varied widely throughout history. The role of an independent media has been debated through the years in both public and private forums. Peter Braestrup, a reporter for United Press International, wrote that there was a "major expansion in the coverage of World War II by the nation's newspapers, as well as a common understanding that the freest possible reporting would lead to and sustain public support for the War effort."<sup>4</sup> Censorship was established by law, executed by military censors, and adhered to by reporters in the field. This acceptance of control enabled military commanders to establish and work within their own comfort levels when dealing with the media. Subsequently, correspondents from major media organizations were widely accepted by the highest levels of forces operating in theaters of battle. Not only were these reporters stationed in various headquarters, but

they also accompanied combat forces on the ground into battle. War correspondents were even among those who stormed onto the beaches at Normandy on 6 June 1944. Reporters operated with the acknowledgement and full support of the senior military leadership.<sup>5</sup>

Acceptance military censorship by reporters, based on necessary, military considerations, helped to ease whatever concerns were present at the staff organization levels. Increasing this amicable atmosphere was a genuine trust between the two groups to not endanger the operational security of units engaged in the on-going fight. Despite several periods of tension based on over-zealous military professionals trying to restrict access, the military-media relationship developed extremely well.

One reason behind the success of this relationship may have been the limited number of reporters available to cover the war. There were not enough reporters to cover all of the battles during the war. Reporters were unable to independently verify many of the press releases and official statements given by public affairs officers. Often those statements were the only information to which newsmen had access and could produce stories from. Another aspect of the World War II operational era was that battles were generally scripted and media participation planned from the outset. Commanders generally knew where the enemy was located. Front lines were mostly delineated and mapped out, separating combatants and detailing where reporters could find battles about which to write their stories.

Reporters and field commanders were able to get to know each other before expecting contact with enemy forces. Detailed efforts were made by Allied forces to include reporters within the operational construct. Press conferences, briefings, accommodations, accreditation, and pooling were all pre-planned as part of the mission.

Accredited correspondents were even given an equivalent rank of Captain in the US Army.<sup>6</sup> This rank enabled them to receive special privileges in military camps and accorded them comprehensive access to soldiers and leaders. Though there were critical accounts of operational strategy and some reports of misbehavior by Allied forces, the overall organizational memory that exists from this period, whether justified or not, is that reporters supported military efforts.

Public affairs operations and spokesmen during World War II operated out of fixed facilities and presented dutifully compiled statements that had been processed and cleared by censors before release. Newsmen were rarely better informed about actual operations and statistics because of limited communication capabilities. The civilian infrastructure was virtually destroyed across Europe and almost non-existent in the Pacific Theater. Reporters mainly relied on military channels to deliver their products back to the United States.

Public affairs officers were often granted a partial reprieve from errors made during the delay from official press release to delivery to news organizations and subsequent publication. Washington policymakers established two levels of scrutiny upon official media correspondence during the war as well. The first level was delegated to commanders in the field who worked directly with reporters on the ground. Dispatches, stories and photographs were then routed back through official military censors located in America who provided a second level of analysis to ensure no compromising information was being disseminated. Finally, the infrastructure of communications, such as telephone, cables, and mail delivery, were generally provided at the discretion of the government. These facilities were not readily available throughout the theater and considerable effort

was expended just to enable stories to be dispatched back to the United States. It could sometimes take several days from an event occurring on the battlefield until it reached the public, even without impediment from military censors.<sup>7</sup>

During the Korean War, the military adopted a policy of access and voluntary censorship from reporters. However, at the request of the media representatives themselves, this was dropped in favor of the World War II model. Reporters were uncomfortable with trying to determine what news stories might compromise operational security. The majority of correspondents covering the Korean War were veterans of World War II, including many who had covered General Douglas MacArthur in the Pacific Theater. MacArthur made it a point to ensure that reporters had complete access to his organization. Even though authorized by Washington to censor the press, he adamantly refused to do so.<sup>8</sup> He identified the public information campaign as a priority for his command and ensured it was treated as such.

The hostile field and climactic conditions limited news coverage of operations. As in World War II, high-level headquarters conducted press briefings and distributed official statements. The majority of available correspondents were tethered to these headquarters and relied on them for much of their information. Few ventured onto the battlefield.<sup>9</sup> The emergence of television news capability did not affect military media relations in Korea. The industry was so limited in numbers that it had little effect on media coverage of military operations. Military public affairs and media operations evolved into nearly the same system as had been used in World War II.

The construction of more expeditious communications systems in the Pacific, as well as expanded access to faster dissemination methods, enabled more stories to be



released for publication before being checked for security violations. Infrastructure in Japan had been generally restored since the end of World War II, enabling information to move more easily back to the United States. On several occasions, reporters operating outside established channels released sensitive military information. This would become a harbinger for operations in Vietnam. However, in Korea, MacArthur continually refused to punish those reporters that did expose sensitive operational information, and this led to very few complaints about access and information by reporters. Public affairs officers and spokesmen were still shielded from the most deleterious effects of questions from reporters, as they still held an upper hand in specific knowledge of operations due to the limited number of reports from the field. Even as the war bogged down from 1952 and beyond, there was no accusation from the military of reporters being the cause.<sup>10</sup>

#### A Changing Environment: Southeast Asia

As the United States expanded operations in Vietnam in 1962, many things had changed since the Korean War. The rapid explosion of technology within the media had drastically altered techniques used to gather and process news. Reporters now carried miniature, hand-held tape recorders and cameras to capture interviews in the words and emotions of the senders. Public affairs personnel were subsequently required to control and monitor their own reactions or risk exposing or altering the content of their material by their emotional expressions. With the proliferation of motion picture and television cameras in Vietnam, body language captured by reporters conveyed information to the public. Since reporters recorded the actual words of public affairs spokesmen, denial of previous announcements became more problematic.

The United States had also become more diverse in what it considered appropriate freedom of expression, and its culture had become more individualistic. This alteration in culture changed the way reporters saw their responsibility for presenting news. “For the first time, the national media saw a duty to cater to those in opposition to the conflict.”<sup>11</sup> Though not necessarily compelling animosity between the two organizations, this new vision of their duty did not endear reporters to the nation’s military and political leadership.

Another important development was a vast increase in communication methods and types of media open to news organizations covering the war. Reporters worked for a wide variety of media outlets and types (figure 1). Public affairs officers needed to provide different responses and supporting services to each type of media. This increased the challenges and complexity of their task.

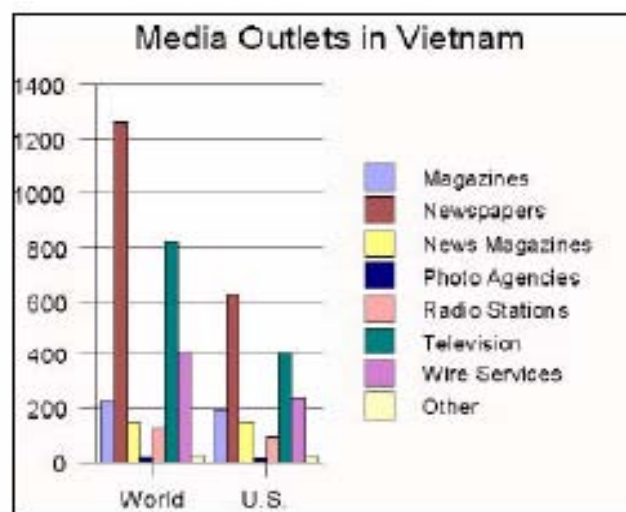


Figure 1. Different Types of Media Coverage during Vietnam

Source: Reprinted, by permission, from: William M. Hammond, *Who Were the Saigon Correspondents and Does It Matter?* (Boston, MA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2000), 39.

News stories that in earlier wars might have been refuted or refined before broadcast were now able to make it onto the air before public affairs officers could correct them. Communication and publication of stories became a race between agencies. The inherent response time from the Army was greatly diminished. Added to these far-reaching changes was the reporter's ability to access a much wider geographical area to gather information. Military resources, to include helicopters, allowed reporters to travel to many different units throughout the country. During these trips, reporters were able to gather even more information about operations and unit situations than was available to the public affairs officers in Saigon. The cumbersome reporting system of military organizations often prevented headquarters from receiving information in a timely manner.

MACV also had to handle a deluge of reporters who came to cover the war. The sheer number (figure 2) of reporters operating within South Vietnam increased their ability to gather and process information. This change in reporters' situational awareness precipitated an adverse environment for the Army. Reporters were able to ask more informed and pointed questions about operations they had witnessed. Public affairs officers needed to be able to operate within these changed operating conditions.

Military officers also had more contempt for their counterparts in the press than in previous wars. On one occasion, walking back down the Pentagon's E-Ring corridor to his office after a press conference, a senior military public affairs officer related a revealing statement to writer William Kennedy; "Dealing with the press is like going on a date with a gorgeous idiot girl. You've got to exercise a lot of restraint. The military services and the Department of Defense don't always exercise such restraint."<sup>12</sup>

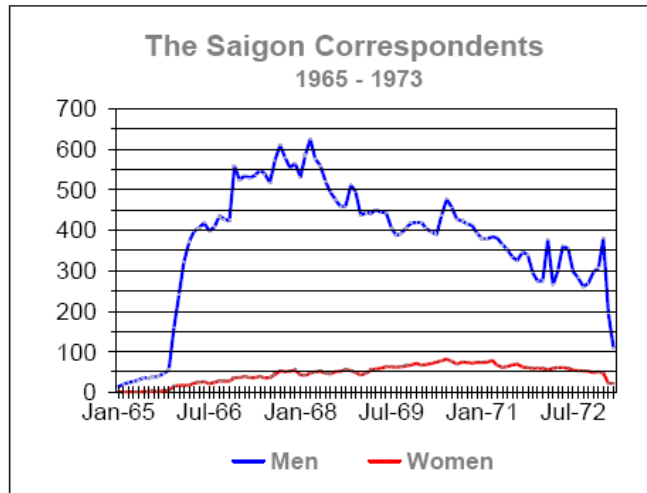


Figure 2. Total Number of Reporters in South Vietnam by Year  
Source: Reprinted, by permission, from: William M. Hammond, *Who Were the Saigon Correspondents and Does It Matter?* (Boston, MA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2000), 38.

Brigadier General Winant Sidle, one of the wartime information officers at MACV, noted “the quality of reporting in Vietnam suffered from advocacy journalism. Too many reporters, especially the younger ones, arrived firmly convinced that the war was unjust, immoral or whatever, and that the U.S. should not be there. This trend became more notable after the Tet Offensive of 1968. These advocacy journalists seemed to think that Americans are incapable of reaching sound, reasonable opinions based on plain-old factual, complete and objective reporting. So the reporter tried to convince his audience via his news coverage that his opinions should be their opinions.”<sup>13</sup> These negative opinions did not help to reconcile the military and media in their efforts to work together.

### MACV Organization: Its People and Influencers

MACV's public affairs office originated as a small section in Saigon on 8 February 1962 with the mission of working as a liaison between the command's combat elements and the reporters dedicated to covering the conflict. On 20 June 1964, the MACV office of information became the sole release point for all military information from Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> As the war developed, the great influx of reporters into the country in parallel to increases in troop levels required a vast expansion of the information section. Although public information and relations was important (as seen in figure 3), the MACV chief of information had many additional information responsibilities in South Vietnam. To what extent these other responsibilities distracted from the public affairs mission goes beyond the scope of this study.

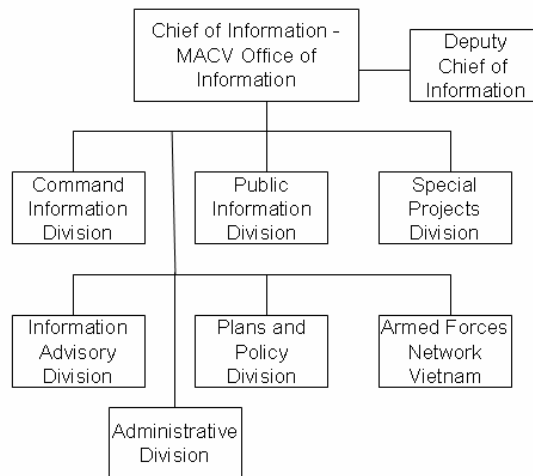


Figure 3. Organization of MACV Office of Information

Originally, the chief public affairs officer was an Air Force lieutenant colonel, yet after assuming command, General William C. Westmoreland believed that a first class public information officer with proper training and experience in ground warfare was better suited for telling the story of the war.<sup>15</sup> For the remainder of the war, Army officers would represent MACV to the media, as it was believed that they would have more credibility in their dealings with reporters.

MACV information officers were directed by two parallel sets of higher-level influences. The military chain of command ran through Commander, MACV to the Commander in Chief, United States Pacific Command. From there it went to the President. Additionally, other senior military officers also shaped policy. The Chief of Staff of the US Army and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff both affected policy formulation and decisions made in Washington, which were directly applied in Vietnam. There were many changes in these military leadership positions during the war. These changes had significant effects upon public affairs policies.

Civilian officials also affected public affairs policy during the war. The American Ambassador to South Vietnam appointed a chief of information, in order to more closely coordinate information activities between the State Department and the military. In addition, the Secretary of Defense established an assistant secretary for public affairs in order to establish inter-service teamwork in their media activities. Like the military, the changes of civilian officials affected the direction of information policies.

### The Importance of Media Policy Changes

Harrison Salisbury, a correspondent for the *New York Times*, wrote “the deep schisms born in Vietnam between correspondents and the US Government and military

live on and feed the fires of the growing battle of the myth, the struggle for the symbols which will characterize Vietnam in history and around which future political controversy will be waged.”<sup>16</sup> These deep schisms were brought about by the many changes in policy enacted by MACV. Without a coherent and steady policy in place to be followed by the military in Vietnam, reporters were rightfully confused by public affairs officers’ actions.

Three lieutenant colonels and a colonel who had fought as battalion commanders during the Tet Offensive conducted an important study focused on the military media relationship. This study included a statistical analysis of Tet Offensive coverage by national media and concluded that while Tet was a tactical American victory, it was initially portrayed incorrectly to the American people as a defeat and resulted in a psychological defeat.<sup>17</sup> The military was unable to correct reporters’ early impressions. This was a direct result of a lack of credibility in MACV, a lack of credibility brought on by so many policy changes.

It is imperative that the Army’s actions are presented to the American public in a concise and professional manner. By default, the best way to distribute that message is through the myriad of dedicated news and media organizations that cover military affairs and operations. However, many reporters believed during Vietnam, and continue to believe, that the government and military lied and distorted what was happening on the ground and what was the true American policy in the region.<sup>18</sup> Public affairs policy changes in MACV contributed directly to this belief.

Within the larger context of the Vietnam War, public opinion of military operations played a significant role. By understanding how military and governmental policies affected MACV’s interactions with reporters, future leaders can make more

informed decisions when considering a deviation from established regulations. To determine what effects changes in MACV and the US Army's public affairs (PA) in Vietnam had on their relationship with reporters, a thorough examination of changes in policy during the war is required.

It is not useful to reexamine any assignment of blame for the strategic defeat laid upon the United States in Vietnam. That has been covered in numerous other works. In effect, the outcome of the Vietnam War is irrelevant for examining how media policy worked. Some historians have observed that as the war continued, increasing numbers of reporters thought that the war was unjust and sought out stories that supported their point of view. Regardless of whether or not this was the case, the significant point of negative stories emanating from Vietnam, attacking the American involvement, was not that they were written, but that the American military provided the freedom and access that enabled them to be written.<sup>19</sup> In the best traditions of the United States, and despite embedded antagonism, the military allowed and assisted reporters on the battlefield, even when it proved disadvantageous.

A formalized, generally ill-informed public information section in Vietnam met the ever-growing demand for official information. Briefing officers with information and charts to placate a growing number of reporters in the country manned the office.<sup>20</sup> MACV had the means to interact with reporters but would rely on its policies to govern this relationship. The written policy of the Army before the war had been to be truthful and candid with reporters, within the constraints of operational security. Public affairs officers struggled with a perceived need to justify military actions in a political realm and their requirements to be truthful with reporters.



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<sup>1</sup>Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Random House, 1978), 4.

<sup>2</sup>Frank Aukofer and William P. Lawrence, *America's Team: The Odd Couple* (Nashville: The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 1995), 31.

<sup>3</sup>Phillip Knightley, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 107.

<sup>4</sup>Peter Braestrup, *Battle Lines: Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Military and the Media* (New York: Priority Press Publications, 1985), 25.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>11</sup>Peter Jesser and Peter R. Young, *The Media and the Military: From the Crimea to Desert Strike* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 79.

<sup>12</sup>William V. Kennedy, *The Military and the Media: Why the Press Cannot be Trusted to Cover a War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 11.

<sup>13</sup>Winant Sidle, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 111.

<sup>14</sup>William H. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 23.

<sup>15</sup>William H. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1988), 83.

<sup>16</sup>Harrison E. Sallisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 83.

<sup>17</sup>Kennedy, *The Military and the Media*, 110.

<sup>18</sup>Sallisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*, 83.

<sup>19</sup>Phillip Knightley , *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 107.

<sup>20</sup>Jesser and Young, *Crimea to Desert Strike*, 85.

## CHAPTER 2

### A VIETNAMESE AFFAIR

It is important to understand the changes in the practical application of public affairs policy that occurred during the Vietnam War. These policies were developed in different locations but were ultimately passed down to public affairs personnel in MACV for implementation. Agencies outside the military chain of command that produced guidance and directed media operations in Vietnam included Presidential administrations, US State Department offices (both in Washington and in the American embassy in Saigon), the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. With so many people shaping and controlling public affairs policy, it is not surprising that MACV had difficulty implementing a coherent and consistent method of engaging the media. Impacts of these changes on military and media relations were felt not only in connection with individual policies but also as a cumulative effect of all changes.

It is also critical to recognize that policies implemented during Vietnam were not followed in a mutually exclusive manner. Policy changes implemented by MACV came from originating agencies in a piecemeal fashion through unofficial channels. Since such policies were not formally processed in the military system, many were never officially rescinded. It was up to individual public affairs spokesmen to determine when a policy had been supplanted. This led to concurrent implementation of multiple policies depending upon which spokesman was making an official statement.

The relationship between newsmen and military public affairs people in South Vietnam was changed by domestic politics, as it had not been in previous wars.<sup>1</sup> This change focused reporters' attention on issues brought to light by politicians back in

Washington. Reporters in the field had better communications with their offices in America. Editors and producers were looking for big stories to feed the public's appetite for news.

Army Regulation 360-5 established the official US Army policy for conduct of public information campaigns at the start of Vietnam. This regulation stated directly, "The American public has a right to maximum information concerning the Army and its activities. Defense Department and Army policy require maximum disclosure of information except for that which would be of material assistance to potential enemies."<sup>2</sup> With an established foundation, expressed in clearly defined terms, Army public affairs officers in MACV should have been able to accurately portray the situation in Vietnam. Official policy would never be as clear on the ground as it was in the regulation.

The first major public affairs policy change was the issuance of a diplomatic cable. This cable marked the commencement of changes in Vietnam that moved policy away from the stated goal of Army regulations. It continued unabated until the Honolulu Conference on media policy in March 1965, where public affairs officials tried to merge changes in policy into one coherent strategy.

#### CABLE 1006, February 1962

Obfuscation of official military public affairs policy began with the distribution of a diplomatic message passed through the State Department. "On February 21, 1962, the U.S. Information Agency and State and Defense departments solidified the press policy for South Vietnam in a message to the U.S. mission in Saigon. Widely known as Cable 1006, the directive stressed the need to reinforce the idea that the war was essentially a South Vietnamese affair."<sup>3</sup> The US Embassy relayed the contents of this cable to MACV.

Previously, US military personnel had been free to follow official regulations and had been candid with reporters. MACV advisors in the field understood the growing and indispensable role American forces were playing in the war and freely passed this information on to reporters. These officers and Soldiers were proud of their service and wanted to let the American public know what they were accomplishing in Vietnam. After Cable 1006, reporters who had previously had open access to MACV personnel found themselves persona non grata with higher headquarters. Senior officers in Vietnam attempted to keep reporters from covering US advisors in the field. Conventional wisdom believed that it would be easier to control reporters away from the battlefield, since emotions affected the comments given to reporters by American advisors.

In evidence to this, shortly after Cable 1006 arrived in Saigon, reporters began to complain about difficulties in getting information from their sources in MACV.<sup>4</sup> Newspapers were reporting that American officers who leaked stories unflattering to the Saigon government (regardless of their truth) were tracked down and muzzled.<sup>5</sup> Later, Homer Bigart of the *New York Times* stated, “American officers are frustrated and irritated by the constant whimsical meddling of the [Vietnamese] President and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, in the military chain of command.”<sup>6</sup> Each of these incidents indicated an understanding by reporters that the military was trying to prevent a free flow of information, which they believed was their right.

Even as MACV was implementing Cable 1006 and declaring that the war was strictly a Vietnamese affair to reporters, National Security Memorandum 111 was drafted in secret. This memorandum represented President John F. Kennedy’s decision to increase significantly the American role in the conflict. The memorandum specifically

called on President Ngo Dinh Diem to accept an American share in the decision-making processes in political, economic, and military affairs of South Vietnam as they affected the security situation.<sup>7</sup> The Central Intelligence Agency also predicted an American military ascendance in the conflict. “The initial reaction of the S.V. [South Vietnamese] would be somewhat ambivalent; encouragement over the reinforcement, accompanied by some tendency to relax and let the U.S. do the fighting.”<sup>8</sup> Now a conflict existed between the desire of President Kennedy to marginalize the conflict and the actual expanded American military role.

Cable 1006 created a dilemma. The stated goal of Army public affairs policy was to tell the truth, while Cable 1006 required spokesmen to deny what their own reports were telling them. MACV began to realize that the Cable’s impact on operations would be significant. In early 1964, the Army commissioned a report to examine the impacts of public affairs policy changes. Brigadier General John M. Finn fully identified changes in policy as a problem in the 21 March 1964 final report to the Army Chief of Staff, General Earle G. Wheeler. This report recommended an expanded MACV Public Affairs Office to provide reporters with up to date and factual information on current operations. General Finn’s report further identified that reporters frequently traveled on military operations and were thoroughly knowledgeable about combat and had seen directly the roles that US advisors were playing.<sup>9</sup> The report also recognized that it was futile to hide or marginalize activities of US forces, as reporters were seeing those actions for themselves. The report advocated returning to the prewar Army regulation’s policy of open and candid interaction with reporters.

Another issue pertaining to the implementation of Cable 1006 arose in Washington. Observing that different services were deciding on their public affairs strategies independently and fearing a loss of control over information policy, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara moved to consolidate previously independent military service public relations operations under a single, all-powerful civilian assistant secretary of defense for public affairs. He appointed Arthur Sylvester, the Washington news bureau chief for the *Newark Evening News*, who had proclaimed the government had a “right to lie” to the public when that lie was in the national interest.<sup>10</sup>

This development obviously raised some suspicions about the veracity of official information to reporters. McNamara’s intent was to be able to control, and therefore limit information through a single source and not allow reporters to play different military services off of one another. This decision added another layer of supervision of policy implementation to MACV and multiplied the bureaucratic requirements for executing public affairs policy. This desire had dire consequences. Walter Cronkite later summarized the impression this left on reporters, “I would like to suggest that one of the reasons for the great confusion which wracks this nation today of the Vietnam War is the fact that we were committed without a proper airing of the facts – all the facts! This administration and preceding ones did not level with the American people on the nature of the scope of the commitment.”<sup>11</sup> Some reporters felt as if the President’s subordinates were intentionally misleading the public about the conduct of military operations in Vietnam. Reporters tried to refute those statements by examining combat actions in MACV’s operational area.

Despite official policy efforts, restrictions on information did not prevent investigative reporters from gaining access to Army advisors in the field, where their actions and comments in the heat of battle were sometimes contrary to official statements. Media reports emanating from South Vietnam continued to reflect the perceived reality of the situation on the ground. “For months, U.S. Army advisors in the field had generalized in public about what was wrong with South Vietnam, its government, and its army, and for months newsmen had mined those statements for the sensations they contained. During May 1963, Secretary of Defense McNamara requested that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff take action to limit the practice.”<sup>12</sup> The Chairman directed that all military services implement the Secretary’s request.

The Army agency responsible for training officers bound for South Vietnam, US Army Continental Army Command (CONARC), shortly thereafter issued policy guidance to remedy this problem. Despite drawbacks inherent in a policy of allowing newsmen open access to field units, CONARC noted that any attempt to reduce contacts between reporters and MACV advisors would bring on public relations problems by suggesting that the Army had something to hide. CONARC’s solution was that all US Army personnel newly assigned to South Vietnam would confine their conversations with newsmen to areas of personal responsibility and knowledge.<sup>13</sup> This was only a reaffirmation of official Army regulations, which stated:

Members of the military are encouraged to broaden the public’s knowledge of the Army by responding factually, candidly, and fully about those unclassified matters of which they have personal knowledge and experience. This may be accomplished either informally or formally through discussions, associations with civilian professional groups, speaking on matters in which the individual has expertise, writing bylined articles for publication, and participation in local community affairs. Individual service members are entitled to express



personal opinion except as limited by law or regulation. There should be no comment on matters in litigation or which may be speculative. Individuals should avoid remarks or responses about military matters that are beyond their knowledge or experience.<sup>14</sup>

CONARC's solution was problematic, in that while restricting official comments on internal politics of South Vietnam, advisors knew about the shortcomings of South Vietnamese military forces with which they were working. The information that the government wanted to suppress was inside the areas of personal responsibility and knowledge of the advisors. MACV, without specifically prohibiting soldiers from speaking to the media, was unable to prevent information being distributed from the field. Additionally, reporters were still able to take full advantage of anonymous sources, which Army leaders were unable to suppress.

Events in South Vietnam, which illustrated that American forces were playing a significant, if somewhat isolated, role in combat, also refuted the message of Cable 1006. Neil Sheehan wrote in the *Washington Post* about an incident on 7 January 1963. "U.S. casualties were the highest to date; three killed in action, ten wounded in action, of fourteen helicopters involved, eleven were hit and five crashed." The senior American advisor, LTC John Paul Vann, had to assemble sixty American advisors, cooks and communications personnel into an ad-hoc infantry unit in order to rescue a US major who had been abandoned by South Vietnamese forces.<sup>15</sup> The need to assemble American combat forces to assist US Soldiers in jeopardy was a sign that more American involvement was necessary. In governmental circles, Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor returned to Washington to become President Lyndon B. Johnson's special military advisor. He observed that the "concept of assistance as the primary role of U.S. ground forces seems to have dropped out and that of primary doer to have taken its place."<sup>16</sup>

Despite this admission in private, MACV continued to adhere to Cable 1006's policy guidance.

Reporters continued to disbelieve the official public affairs position that MACV was acting only as advisors and that it was just a Vietnamese problem. Bureaucratic policies contributed to this perception. An Australian reporter, Hugh Lunn, noted that on his first day in country, he was required to get a MACV accreditation card to be a reporter. He was also required to get one from the Vietnamese government, but throughout his time in Vietnam, he was never required to use or show his Vietnamese card, while his American card was used nearly every day. His impression was that this "indicated clearly enough who was waging the war in Vietnam."<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising that his reporting reflected his perceptions.

As the buildup of US advisors progressed, General Westmoreland became worried that the presence of US combat troops might create anti-American sentiment within South Vietnam's military.<sup>18</sup> MACV's staff reinforced this point by issuing a report on South Vietnamese officers in Long An Province. These officers were complaining about the increasing number of American advisors in Vietnamese units. They observed, "Americans are not sticking to their role as advisors; instead they are assuming command functions."<sup>19</sup> Through a series of anonymous leaks, reporters were able to pick up on discrepancies between official statements and observations by military personnel, sewing the seeds of future distrust. The *New York Times* reported, "Some Americans continue to chafe under the rules barring them from giving and enforcing orders to South Vietnamese troops in combat."<sup>20</sup> There was a growing sense, both in the minds of reporters and within MACV, that American forces were assuming a wider role

in the war's direction. Despite this realization, MACV adhered to Cable 1006's policy guidance.

While his concerns about the reaction of Vietnamese troops were being aired, Westmoreland had to reconcile a MACV staff report on the state of their leadership. The report, released on 10 March 1965, MACV stated that South Vietnamese generals were too involved in power politics and coups to perform their traditional military duties. The study went further to recommend that American forces establish more effective influence over Vietnamese armed forces. It even took the position that all South Vietnamese forces be placed under direct US command.<sup>21</sup> MACV also had approval authority over the South Vietnamese defense budget and implemented the military assistance program. This enabled MACV to effectively dictate to the South Vietnamese what equipment they could receive, how they trained and organized, and how those forces could be employed in battle (constrained by logistical support).<sup>22</sup> Reporters saw all of this as more evidence that the war was not just a Vietnamese problem, the US was intricately involved.

It became clear that the military closely scrutinized statements reaching the press. On 18 June 1964, disparaging comments about policies of the South Vietnamese government appeared in newspapers. Secretary of the Army Stephen Ailes and Army Chief of Staff Earle G. Wheeler wanted the officer who made the statement to the reporter identified, though they claimed it was not for retribution.<sup>23</sup> The practical effect of this inquiry was to serve notice to military personnel in Vietnam that they needed to watch their words carefully, that higher commanders would monitor their interactions with reporters, and served to inhibit communication between the military and the reporters in Vietnam.

Another concern of the MACV staff during this time was that committing additional American military forces would slow down improvement of South Vietnamese combat effectiveness. Most American advisors agreed that their army would become effective at executing military operations only when it took offensive action against the Viet Cong. They were rightly concerned that any introduction of US combat units would allow South Vietnamese forces to sit back and leave the hard fighting to American Soldiers.<sup>24</sup> This concern was recorded by reporters and would come back to haunt MACV when military spokesmen attempted to deny it later in the war. It began as the first Marines came ashore at Da Nang in 1965. The nature of news coverage in Vietnam changed immediately. Garrick Utley, a television correspondent for NBC news, noted, "It became a war story; primarily an American story in a foreign country."<sup>25</sup>

Evidence continued to appear that countered the position that the war was only a Vietnamese affair. Late in 1965, Ambassador Taylor voiced strong reservations over attrition strategies that MACV had adopted for the war plan. Taylor believed that such a plan would place the major burden of the war effort on arriving US ground combat troops. The results of this increase in American participation, he warned, would relegate South Vietnamese troops to background roles, dramatically increase American casualties, and fuel domestic opposition to the war effort.<sup>26</sup> It was no surprise that reporters refused to believe military press releases, when government agencies and military officials clearly understood they were not true. Reporters continued to make inquiries about the conduct of the war to MACV and probed the validity of press releases. The MACV public affairs section was unable to confront the problem forthrightly. The Johnson Administration's need to cushion the impact of the war upon the Congress and the

American people prevented any admission of an increase in US participation. Instead, MACV continued to adhere to the guidance of Cable 1006.<sup>27</sup>

Barry Zorthian, a State Department official and chief American information officer in South Vietnam, noted, “Saigon correspondents were as skeptical and cynical a group of newsmen as I have ever seen.” Reporters in Vietnam concentrated on the issues set forth from the White House. They sought to check in piecemeal fashion the claims of progress being made in South Vietnam. Such claims were often privately disputed by trusted sources within MACV and by advisors to South Vietnamese forces in the field.<sup>28</sup> The Cable 1006 position that the war was a Vietnamese affair by this time was overcome by facts on the ground. Reporters simply no longer believed it was true.

By this point, it was clear to MACV and American politicians that additional measures were required to ensure South Vietnam’s survival. In the first half of 1965, President Johnson made the fateful decision to greatly increase American participation in combat against North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. This process took two forms; sustained and gradually increasing aerial bombardment of targets throughout Southeast Asia and deployment to South Vietnam of complete US combat formations, both Army and Marine, along with their supporting elements.<sup>29</sup> These decisions finally allowed MACV public affairs officers to abandon the façade that Cable 1006 had erected.

MACV’s adherence to Cable 1006 guidance began a process by which reporters lost faith with public affairs officers in Vietnam. The result of this policy was aptly surmised by Associated Press reporter Peter Arnett, who had been in country for several years, “The military authorities wanted us to paint an image of Vietnam as a valued, threatened ally. But that did not square with what we were seeing: a corrupt, irresolute

leadership and a country sinking into its own effluent . . . despite Westmoreland's earnest attempts to approach the press, and our honest endeavors to accommodate him, it was hard to stay on good terms.”<sup>30</sup>

#### Max Candor, July 1964

On 7 July 1964, the US State Department issued new public affairs guidance through the American Embassy in Saigon to MACV and other US personnel in South Vietnam. This guidance superseded all previous messages on the subject. The State Department charged Zorthian with ensuring that American public affairs activities promoted maximum candor and disclosure consistent with the requirements of military security.<sup>31</sup> During private discussions government officials reached an understanding that distortions of facts about combat in Vietnam would be detrimental to the war effort and the public's support. MACV believed that wider information dissemination would lead to more favorable reporting. MACV spokesmen related all information to reporters, even using off the record comments to give them a deeper context of actions. Spokesmen identified which parts of their statements were sensitive and were not to be published. The military saw an increased flow of information as a way to increase reporters' favorable treatment of the Johnson Administration's policies in South Vietnam.

By December 1964, it was apparent to MACV public affairs officers that the “max candor” policy improved the quality of war reporting. However, the policy failed to achieve its primary objective, which was the creation of a climate of public opinion favorable to the Johnson Administration's ends in South Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> MACV public affairs officers continued to battle skepticism from reporters. MACV's max candor policy was significantly damaged by President Johnson's and his administration's lack of

credibility with reporters. The *New York Times* reported on 17 May 1966, "What he [President Johnson] wants is worthy of the faith and confidence of the nation, but this is precisely what he does not have, because his techniques blur his conviction. . . . He is mixing up the news and the truth. . . . He is confronted, in short, with a crisis in confidence."<sup>33</sup> Reporters in South Vietnam tried to disprove Presidential statements. MACV spokesmen were then faced with a choice between providing max candor to reporters or maintaining loyalty to their commander in chief, a very undesirable position.

Another drawback associated with the max candor policy was that MACV spokesmen often received information and details about engagements long after they occurred. Reporters received exclusive information from their own sources more rapidly than the MACV headquarters received it from military units. The inability of spokesmen to respond to such incidents when queried by reporters made it seem as if the Army had something to hide. The speed of information flow during the war was something that the military was not prepared to deal with properly. First contact reports were almost universally incorrect or partially accurate. MACV was unwilling to disseminate initial information to reporters until a more concise depiction of what occurred was constructed. Some reporters in Vietnam were unconcerned about accuracy and rushed to be the first to get the story to the wire. Competition between news organizations to be the first to release a story also quickened the reporters' pace. Officials at the State Department even went as far as suggesting the establishment of an independent government wire service to get ahead of reporters, an idea that was rejected.<sup>34</sup> No solutions were found to fix MACV's inability to control the tempo of reporting.

MACV established an environment where official statements were losing their credibility. The daily briefings became a particular issue for close scrutiny by reporters. Most did not take them seriously, derisively labeling them the “Five O’clock Follies.” Since these briefings were invariably based on inaccurate field reports and contained fragmentary information that was portrayed in a favorable light by public affairs officials, they usually read like “police blotters.”<sup>35</sup>

Some reporters viewed the daily Saigon briefings even more cynically. Hugh Lunn thought that various techniques were applied to unfavorable news at the “follies” that either dampened its impact or killed its story value altogether. MACV spokesmen took large chunks of bad news and piecemealed them out at different times, to make it seem repetitive. Spokesmen also buried information in confusing acronyms. They attempted to bias reporters by constantly using one-sided language to reflect their point of view.<sup>36</sup> Some reporters felt as if MACV was trying to recruit them to assist in the American war effort.

Public affairs officers faced a challenging dilemma. If they were conservative and refused to release information until all facts were collected, they were accused of hiding or covering up events. If they prematurely released information, and it later proved to be incorrect, they were accused of deliberately lying. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on 23 April 1965, that “Time after time, high ranking representatives of the government – in Washington and Saigon – have obscured, confused, or distorted news from Vietnam, or have made fatuously erroneous evaluations about the course of the war for public consumption.”<sup>37</sup> MACV was unable to find a solution for this dilemma during the course of the war.



Public affairs policy under max candor also made it difficult to respond to violations of trust by reporters. For example, MACV had chosen not to interpret White House or Saigon official statements in any way. Public affairs officers were to instead provide deep background information to more responsible members of the press in order to present a more balanced (and, as senior officers hoped, more favorable) picture of the military and political situations in South Vietnam.<sup>38</sup> On 24 December 1964, US Ambassador Taylor, conducted a background briefing for a group of reporters. Taylor realized that his candor gave Saigon reporters a better perspective on a recent military coup within the South Vietnamese government. Even though the interview was off the record, Beverly Deepe, a reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune* not present at the meeting, published it completely.<sup>39</sup> She had received notes of the meeting taken by another reporter who was present. MACV realized after her story was printed that there was no way to effectively censure her for publishing it. Not considered one of the more “favorable” reporters, she was not invited to the interview itself and felt no reason to be bound by its off the record status. MACV was then faced with the options of not conducting background briefings for reporters or living with the consequences if information contained in them was published. This puzzle continued throughout the war.

Increasing American military involvement in Vietnam and the desire of the Johnson Administration to limit the war’s visibility to the American public further eroded the max candor policy. On 31 October 1964, the military completed a study of North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam. MACV officials requested to immediately release the report in keeping with max candor policies, as it provided clear evidence to support their contentions in daily briefings. At first, the Johnson Administration agreed

that the policy of telling the truth on Vietnam – given specific pressure from the press in Saigon, who had been promised disclosure for several weeks – was important. Yet despite this agreement, instead of max candor, the Administration authorized MACV to indicate only the general nature of evidence, and what it showed to reporters, on a background basis.<sup>40</sup> The decision to suppress the report created more conflict with reporters.

Despite being pressed about the contents of the report, MACV was still limited by the Administration's unwillingness to release the formal white paper. President Johnson had concern that the scale of infiltration was so extensive that it would shock the public. Additionally, there was concern that once released, it would be impossible to revise numbers contained within the report. MACV's instructions from Washington to withhold the report had their desired effect, allowing enemy infiltration numbers to be revised, but refusal to release the white paper had caused unnecessary conflict with reporters. The changes in the revised reports were minor and did not warrant its initial suppression. The entire report, with its revisions, was finally released to the press in March 1965, by which time it had lost its value as news and its ability to shape public perceptions about the war.

MACV's public information section was unable to keep up with the demands that reporters placed upon it. As the war began to expand and the number of reporters grew, it was clear that the information section needed to grow as well. A formalized and generally ill-informed public information section in Vietnam met the ever-growing demand for official information about the conflict. The office was manned by briefers who presented lots of information but failed to place it into context for reporters.

The max candor policy finally died from its inability to provide correctly colored information to reporters. The military was required to follow the policy gyrations of the government in Washington when providing rationale for military escalation, vindication for the generally misplaced trust in the fighting abilities of the South Vietnamese Army, and justifications for the constant coups and leadership changes within the South Vietnamese Government. Without censorship, the military was forced to move away from max candor and present a different, official version of events.<sup>41</sup>

#### Maintaining a Low Profile, January 1965

After an American air attack on a Laotian bridge on 14 January 1965, MACV officials became trapped between their stated policy of max candor and the Johnson Administration's desire to maintain a low profile for American efforts in Vietnam. Pressed about the incident by reporters, public affairs spokesmen fell back on a standard response, "that is an operational matter upon which we cannot comment."<sup>42</sup> Reporter's reaction to this new strategy of avoiding comment on stories was to begin to search for other sources of available information. Communist radio broadcasts from Hanoi, Shanghai and Moscow were readily available sources. As a result, *The New York Times* was able to publish many of the details of the attack on its front page on 15 January 1965, using information provided from North Vietnamese sources.<sup>43</sup> These details invariably contained a communist spin. Reporters took the lack of information being delivered by MACV as evidence that US forces had something to hide, a consequence that Zorthian and others had identified earlier. There were many illustrations of how this policy would hurt the military and media relationship.

Another example came on 20 March 1965, when Peter Arnett, a veteran reporter, revealed the use of tear gas by American troops during combat operations. He approached Captain Bryan, his MACV information liaison officer, for an official statement about the use of the chemicals. Despite his personal inclination to respond and clarify why tear gas was essential to avoiding civilian casualties, Bryan adhered to the no comment policy and refused to answer Arnett's questions. With no official response from MACV, Arnett replaced official information with his own speculation and inflammatory writing.<sup>44</sup> The article spawned enormous amounts of bad publicity throughout the world regarding American use of chemical weapons. MACV's subsequent attempts to explain the benefits of non-lethal chemicals failed. MACV was unable to change initial perceptions that the story had created. Reaction to Arnett's article removed an effective military tool from field commanders, as use of tear gas was prohibited in order to combat the adverse publicity.

After the war, General Winant Sidle reflected about the propensity of reporters to not fully flesh out their stories: "There were too many reporters unwilling to check stories before filing. Some were lazy; some believed that we wouldn't give them the facts; some felt it was unnecessary to check. We all know that not checking out stories invariably leads to mistakes and low-quality reporting."<sup>45</sup> By refusing to respond to inquiries from reporters, MACV often missed its chance to set the story straight and contributed to the mistakes made by lazy reporters.

"No comment" policies also limited the ability of public affairs officers to gain the initiative with reporters on some stories. One example of this, once larger US military units had been deployed into Vietnam, MACV refused to comment on the extent of

American participation in combat or elaborate on their assigned missions and roles. This refusal was ineffective as reporters were already seeking out combat in the field and had seen American forces in action. It was not until June 1965, that MACV revealed the role of US Marines fighting around Da Nang, and these admissions were only in response to heavy combat losses that could no longer be concealed. This policy of denial and deception through no comment might have been sustainable if reporters had accepted its pretenses. The Johnson Administration required MACV to carry on with such fictions in the face of an increasingly distrustful media.<sup>46</sup>

MACV discovered that reporter Wendell Merick was about to file a story concerning the Shrike air-to-ground antiradar missile. MACV requested permission from higher headquarters to acknowledge the existence of the missile (obviously known to the reporter) and reveal its uses without going into details of value to enemy forces, in order to gain trust and insight with Merick.<sup>47</sup> In a similar case, MACV asked for permission to release information about weapons such as napalm, cluster bombs, flechette bombs, and defoliants, all of which reporters had seen employed on the battlefield. In both cases, the Commander in Chief, US Pacific Command (CINCPAC) upheld the no comment policy on grounds that any information released concerning weapon systems was of value to the enemy and that emotional topics, such as unconventional weapons, might inflame antiwar sentiment.<sup>48</sup> Despite MACV's refusal to comment, the stories were still filed by reporters. These stories were an example of what CINCPAC had hoped to prevent, so nothing was gained by the military in not addressing the reporter's questions.

Another example of futility in respect to no comment policies occurred after US Air Force bombers attacked military targets near Hanoi on 13 December 1966. Radio

Hanoi and other communist news services immediately gave accounts of significant bomb damage to civilian areas around the city. MACV adhered to its policy of not commenting on statements broadcast by enemy sources. The only official response from MACV that day was “the only targets scheduled for attack in the Hanoi area during the last 24 hours were military targets which had been previously struck.”<sup>49</sup> Western visitors to the North Vietnamese capital confirmed reports that damage to civilian areas had occurred. By continuing to stand by its no-comment position, MACV was unable to relay its perspective on the event until several days afterward, when the Air Force released bomb damage photos showing the strikes in the vicinity of military targets. By then, the story had run its course through the media and was not readdressed. As often happened during Vietnam, after stories were published they were seldom revisited or corrected. Magazines, newspapers and television did not want to reproduce old news stories.

In a similar manner to the Hanoi bombings, reporters were able to confirm that air strikes in Laos were continuing. They received this information from numerous leaks in the military forces as well as civilian offices in South Vietnam. As late as 21 December 1965, despite continuing attacks into Laos (of which reporters were completely aware) MACV was convinced that any departure from a policy of no-comment regarding operations Laos would undermine reporter’s confidence in official statements. Public affairs officers believed this regardless of continuing leaks inside their own command that were undermining their statements.<sup>50</sup> This complete disregard for reality, in spite of overwhelming evidence and knowledge by MACV staff members, significantly eroded reporters’ faith in official statements.

Escalation in Vietnam brought with it new problems for MACV in its attempts to maintain a low profile for the war. On 15 March 1965, General Westmoreland requested 33,000 additional troops for immediate deployment to Vietnam. President Johnson initially only approved the deployment of 3,000 Marines along with 20,000 Army logistical support troops to prepare for follow-on deployments, as he was concerned about a rapid escalation of the war and the effect it would have on public opinion.<sup>51</sup>

After a long debate between MACV, the Pentagon and the Administration, it was determined not to announce to reporters any introduction of new units. "If reporters inquired, official spokesmen were to dismiss the movement of troop transports towards South Vietnam as routine fleet maneuvers."<sup>52</sup> The failure to acknowledge deployment did not hide their arrival, as reporters covered the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade splashing ashore along the coast near Da Nang on 3 April 1965. By concealing the obvious, MACV simply lost more credibility with reporters.

By this time, reporters felt that there were other reasons for MACV to maintain a low profile and not comment on military operations. Peter Arnett observed that the Presidential administration was going to war in South Vietnam without declaring it. President Johnson and his advisors did not want to tell the American public and tried to conceal the rapid buildup on men and material, as well as the increasing burden that Americans were taking. Reporters thought that secrecy stamps did not apply because if they could watch ships unloading at the docks, then so could the enemy.<sup>53</sup>

#### The Honolulu Conference, March 1965

By early 1965, MACV and other public affairs officials in Vietnam understood that the overall military information operations strategy was no longer effective. Barry

Zorthian proposed and was authorized to hold a conference on establishing overall media policy to guide public information operations in the war. General Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and General Westmoreland concurred. Public affairs officers from MACV, as well as civilian officials, met in Honolulu from 18 to 20 March 1965 to create that new policy.

One purpose of this conference was to consider whether imposing military censorship would produce the results the Johnson administration sought in regards to controlling information from Vietnam.<sup>54</sup> Two sections from the Vietnam era Army manual on field censorship revealed reasons why censorship might be ineffective. First, “particularly when censorship is applied by the military, they (reporters) are suspicious that its authority may be misdirected towards the covering up of blunders, waste, and general incompetence.”<sup>55</sup> Public affairs officers already understood that they had created a credibility gap with reporters. Implementing censorship would have only confirmed to reporters that MACV was suppressing information. The second section in the regulation described one of the main principles of the field censorship regulation. “The sole criterion for the killing or temporary withholding of any materials submitted for review is that it would be of value to the enemy in prosecution of his war effort.”<sup>56</sup> The restrictions on reporting that the Johnson administration sought regarding information were clearly outside of this standard. Censorship as envisioned from national policy makers was intended to soften the impact of increased military operations in Vietnam on American public opinion.

MACV representatives at the conference argued against attempts to impose censorship. Partially, their argument was a matter of facing reality, as it was clear that



MACV did not have the resources or abilities to successfully enforce censorship throughout Vietnam. Additionally, American forces were restricted by their need to maintain the facade that they were invited allies of South Vietnam. Technically, this meant that the American military was unable to implement countrywide limitations on reporters, as reporters were operating within the sovereign territory of the Republic of Vietnam, outside of US authority.<sup>57</sup> It was also clear that establishing censorship guidelines acceptable to the Johnson administration, defense department officials and military leaders was not practical. Reporters had grown far too skeptical of military sources and most likely would have circumvented any system. Communications facilities able to transmit reporters' stories were readily available through nonmilitary channels. Despite the failure to implement a censorship program, public affairs officers attending the conference were able to reach several policy decisions.

The first decision made at the conference was not to impose mandatory field censorship by MACV. Attendees noted the logistical difficulties in executing a censorship plan over large geographic areas with many different languages and communications methods as the primary reason. Implementing censorship would have been an enormous logistical and administrative burden to MACV. Additionally, unanswered legal questions existed about military censorship during an undeclared war. Senior military officers wanted to avoid those questions. Instead, a more manageable solution of voluntary censorship by reporters was proposed in order to protect imminent and on-going operational security.<sup>58</sup> MACV officials agreed to release all war related information to reporters in Saigon, but reporters would have to withhold publication of such information until it was no longer operationally sensitive.

At first, reporters agreed to these guidelines, as they understood a need for security during sensitive military operations. However, releases by Department of Defense officials of news stories outside of South Vietnam threatened reporters' voluntary participation. On 18 June 1965, the Department of Defense violated the agreement with reporters by releasing information on the success of B-52 bomber strikes in North Vietnam at the Pentagon.<sup>59</sup> Reporters in Washington immediately published this information, already held in confidence by reporters in South Vietnam. This caused significant friction between MACV and local reporters. The Department of Defense officials again released information in Washington about attacks on North Vietnamese Surface to Air Missile sites on 27 July 1965. Reporters in Saigon charged that the entire system of voluntary cooperation with MACV media guidelines would break down if officials refused to follow their own rules.<sup>60</sup> This atmosphere of distrust contributed to the decline in military media cooperation in Vietnam.

The Honolulu Conference attendees also agreed to maintain a policy of no answer, no lies, also known as no comment, with regards to the ongoing air campaign in Laos. However, all participants in the group realized that the sooner those air strikes could be announced, the better off they would be. Public affairs officials clearly understood the futility of ignoring known facts and the damage to official credibility that continued stonewalling of reporters entailed.<sup>61</sup>

Lastly, the Honolulu Conference identified a problem in associating pro-American propaganda with official news statements. MACV had released statements of combat actions along with an official justification for those attacks. The purpose of these justifications was to link air strikes and ground actions to provocations by enemy forces.

This linkage did nothing to improve MACV credibility with reporters. The suggestion of the conference to remove this linkage was rejected by General Wheeler in Washington, who felt that justifications were necessary in order to maintain legitimacy of US actions in Vietnam. The policy of linking combat reports to justifications would continue.<sup>62</sup>

### Summary

The military media relationship that existed in previous US wars did not reemerge in Vietnam, despite what so many American officers seemed to have expected. With a new arsenal of technology and communications systems, reporters covered Vietnam as they had never been able to cover warfare before. Reporters' situational awareness became more acute than MACV's own staff in many instances. It became clear to MACV's public affairs officers that reporters did not accept false information. Reporters were able to verify for themselves all of the statements made in Saigon. The military's failure to implement an effective and cohesive public affairs policy, as the situation in Vietnam changed, doomed its trust with reporters. By continuing to insist it was a Vietnamese problem and failing to effectively utilize the max candor policy, MACV only widened the credibility gap.

All of these issues were explored in Honolulu and identified as serious problems. Despite this rational examination about the effects of changes in official policy, it seemed none of the policy makers could craft a policy that would work. With weak credibility, MACV continued to struggle with reporters throughout the war.

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Braestrup, *Battle Lines: Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Military and the Media* (New York: Priority Press Publications, 1985), 63.

<sup>2</sup>US Army, AR 360-5, *Public Information* (Washington, DC: US Army, 29 August 1961), 3.

<sup>3</sup>William H. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1988), 15.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Homer Bigart, "Saigon's Regime Rejects Pressure for Reform," *New York Times*, 3 June 1962.

<sup>6</sup>Homer Bigart, "Vietnam Victory Remote despite US Aid to Diem," *New York Times*, 25 July 1962.

<sup>7</sup>Larry Nerman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1982), 23.

<sup>8</sup>National Intelligence Council, *Estimative Products on Vietnam, 1948-1975* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2005), 255.

<sup>9</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 75.

<sup>10</sup>William V. Kennedy, *The Military and the Media: Why the Press Cannot be Trusted to Cover a War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 91.

<sup>11</sup>Braestrup, *Battle Lines*, 62.

<sup>12</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 44.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>14</sup>US Army, AR 360-5, *Public Information* (Washington, DC: US Army, 29 August 1961), 3.

<sup>15</sup>Neil Sheehan, "Vietnamese Ignored US Battle Order," *The Washington Post*, 7 January 1963.

<sup>16</sup>Jeffrey J. Clarke, *US Army in Vietnam Advice and Support: The Final Years 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 121.

<sup>17</sup>Hugh Lunn, *Vietnam: A Reporter's War* (Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1985), 6.

<sup>18</sup>Lloyd J. Matthers and D.E. Brown eds., *Assessing the Vietnam War* (Washington: Potomac Books, 1987), 85.

<sup>19</sup>US Army, *MACV Command History, 1966* (Saigon, Vietnam: US Army, 19 April 1967), 642.

- <sup>20</sup>“Americans chafe under rules,” *New York Times*, 30 January 1965.
- <sup>21</sup>Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 81.
- <sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 77.
- <sup>23</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 94.
- <sup>24</sup>Matthers and Brown, *Assessing the Vietnam War*, 85.
- <sup>25</sup>Garrick Utley, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 96.
- <sup>26</sup>Matthers and Brown, *Assessing the Vietnam War*, 69.
- <sup>27</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 93.
- <sup>28</sup>Braestrup, *Battle Lines*, 62.
- <sup>29</sup>David L. Anderson, *The Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005), 45.
- <sup>30</sup>Peter Arnett, *Live from the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad, 35 Years in the World's War Zones* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 138.
- <sup>31</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 87.
- <sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.
- <sup>33</sup>Braestrup, *Battle Lines*, 62.
- <sup>34</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* p95.
- <sup>35</sup>Braestrup, *Battle Lines*, 63.
- <sup>36</sup>Lunn, *Vietnam: A Reporters War*, 87.
- <sup>37</sup>Braestrup, *Battle Lines*, 62.
- <sup>38</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*p116.
- <sup>39</sup>Beverly Deepe, “Taylor Rips Mask off Khahn,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 December 1964.
- <sup>40</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 116.
- <sup>41</sup>Peter Jesser and Peter R. Young, *The Media and the Military: From the Crimea to Desert Strike* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 85.

- <sup>42</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 134.
- <sup>43</sup>“USAF fighter-bombers knock out key Laotian Bridge on Route 9,” *New York Times*, 15 January 1969.
- <sup>44</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 154.
- <sup>45</sup>Winant Sidle, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 111.
- <sup>46</sup>Jesser and Young, *Crimea to Desert Strike*, 84.
- <sup>47</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 240.
- <sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 241.
- <sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 273.
- <sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 217.
- <sup>51</sup>William H. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 45.
- <sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>53</sup>Arnett, *Live from the Battlefield*, 89.
- <sup>54</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 144.
- <sup>55</sup>US Army, FM 45-25, *Field Press Censorship* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1954), 4.
- <sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>57</sup>Jesser and Young, *Crimea to Desert Strike*, 80.
- <sup>58</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 144.
- <sup>59</sup>Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 53.
- <sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 184.
- <sup>61</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 145.
- <sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*

## CHAPTER 3

### SOFTEN THE BLOW

In 1965, some minor changes were made to the Army's public affairs regulation; however, its basic procedures and goals were not altered. US Army doctrine and regulations still required military personnel to make full and complete disclosure to the public about all areas that were not restricted due to operational security. Unfortunately, practical application of the regulation remained unfulfilled as unwritten policies were enforced by MACV.

American involvement in the war was expanding as additional military forces were deployed into South Vietnam. President Johnson made a purposefully understated announcement at a mid-day press conference that 50,000 US troops would go to South Vietnam immediately and that additional forces would follow.<sup>1</sup> As troop levels increased, so did the number of reporters, and MACV was increasingly challenged to conduct public affairs operations effectively.

The period of American escalation coincided, ironically, with a revival of attempts to portray the war as primarily a South Vietnamese effort. Complicating MACV's failure to adhere to doctrine, reporters in Vietnam were becoming more cynical in their interactions with military public affairs officers. Morley Safer, a veteran journalist and later *60 Minutes* correspondent, offered candid remarks about the status of this relationship.

Did this mean that every military and civilian briefing authority lied all the time? Not exactly. But you were a fool to report what they told you without checking it very carefully. Those of us who were more or less permanently based in Vietnam quickly became disillusioned by the so called "five o'clock follies." Those afternoon briefings only significant use was for gathering basic facts;

arrivals of units, the inevitable body count, losses, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troop strengths. I would be less than honest if I did not mention one further use. Those briefings provided a kind of sport: to tweak the briefer or dazzle your friends and competitors with more up to date information than anyone else had – and occasionally to publicly embarrass MACV. It was not difficult. The Saigon version of events was almost always at variance with what happened in the field, witnessed by a correspondent or described by an officer or civilian representative who gave you unfiltered information.<sup>2</sup>

Official credibility had suffered in earlier years of the war and created conflict with the media.

Government reaction to stories published from Vietnam did not help this situation. After viewing Safer's broadcast on the burning of houses in the village of Cam Ne, Arthur Sylvester, the Deputy Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, called Fred Friendly, president of CBS news, asking "now that you have spit on the American flag, how do you feel?"<sup>3</sup> More ominously, Friendly was awakened the morning after the story's broadcast by a phone call. "'Frank, are you trying to f--- me?' yelled a voice. 'Who is this?' asked the president of CBS. 'Frank, this is your president,' answered Lyndon Johnson, 'and yesterday your boys shat on the American flag.'"<sup>4</sup> With this type of pressure from the highest leadership being played, it is not surprising that reporters became defensive in their interactions with military officials. These extreme reactions also exemplify some of the pressure that military officers were being placed under, since the military is subservient to civilian rule.

This period was marked by the efforts of General Westmoreland to achieve military victory through an attrition warfare model and includes the Tet Offensive, which vastly changed American interpretations of Vietnam. The general intent of public affairs operations during this time was to lessen the impact of the war on the American public. President Johnson was still attempting to create his "Great Society" domestically and did



not want the distraction of foreign military affairs upsetting these programs. When the scope of US military involvement passed the level at which it could no longer be played down, officials decided to create the impression that success was just around the corner. These high expectations were impossible to reach.

#### Downplay American Involvement, May 1965

On 4 May 1965, the Department of Defense informed Barry Zorthian that a review of MACV news releases and briefings had revealed an overemphasis on American efforts in South Vietnam. Officials in Washington decided that reporters were creating an impression in the US where American forces were occupying the country and taking over the war. In order to reduce this perception of American ascendance, MACV needed to downplay its involvement in the war. Public affairs officers began to stress South Vietnamese accomplishments and the fact that the American role in the war was only of advice and support. This new policy of downplaying US involvement was significantly different from that of Cable 1006, in that instead of a passive effort, public affairs officers were required to actively seek out reporters and convince them of the Department of Defense message.

The stated intention of the Department of Defense was to eventually turn reporters, who considered themselves “war correspondents,” into “counterinsurgency correspondents.”<sup>5</sup> Once again, military officials believed that reporters should actively participate in the American war effort. On 30 October 1965, Ambassador Lodge reinforced the policy of downplaying US involvement by issuing guidance that Department of Defense (and thus MACV) employees in South Vietnam must emphasize that Americans were not taking over the war. He also believed that those statements that

downplayed the efforts and suffering of South Vietnamese people only played into communist hands.<sup>6</sup> MACV acknowledged this new policy in its command history, where it specifically emphasized South Vietnamese achievements during numerous discussions by key members of its staff with newsmen and influential visitors. Major General Arthur L. West Jr., a senior MACV officer, further directed that every echelon of command must be alert to situations that might improve the Vietnamese image, and direct reporters to them.<sup>7</sup>

Contradictory evidence to this policy soon arose. On 2 March 1966, a battle erupted at the A Shau Special Forces camp. MACV officers viewed the performance of South Vietnamese troops during the battle as less than desirable. American Special Forces advisors were required to assume control of the battle to avoid destruction of the allied force. US military personnel present at the battle related these facts to reporters.<sup>8</sup> MACV public affairs officers immediately tried to downplay any derogatory comments by the American advisors, stating that the battle was an isolated occurrence.

More conclusive evidence of the increasing US role came during the first week of May 1966. For the first time, American battle casualties exceeded those of South Vietnamese forces. General Westmoreland responded to this development by stating “most South Vietnamese casualties resulted from enemy initiatives and the communists had launched few attacks of late.”<sup>9</sup> If Westmoreland’s statement was taken literally, he was admitting that American forces were actively seeking out enemy contact while South Vietnamese troops did not, which refuted the stated American position. Reporters did not fail to notice this conflict between official public affairs statements and the actions and statements of leaders.

In a letter to subordinate commanders dated 22 October 1966, General Westmoreland attempted to reinforce the policy of downplaying US actions. He wrote, “It should be the goal of each component’s command information program to so indoctrinate our servicemen that they will talk up civic action programs. Whenever possible, progress in the war should be attributed to South Vietnamese efforts. Only then can we dispel the frequent assertions at home that the effort in Vietnam is largely an American operation.”<sup>10</sup> Reporters countered the emphasis on South Vietnamese accomplishments by identifying that their military forces continued to suffer from poor leadership, poor pay and a general lack of motivation. Many units were no longer able to perform even limited duties such as protecting civil action teams.<sup>11</sup> In the view of reporters throughout South Vietnam, American forces were clearly taking control of military operations.

MACV public affairs officers were convinced that any attempt to downplay the American role in South Vietnam would fail. Based on reports from the field, they had little hope for greater South Vietnamese contributions to the war effort in the near future. American advisors had seen negligible if any improvement in their military performance.<sup>12</sup> During June 1965, US Marines and 173rd Airborne Brigade troops were not sitting tight inside their perimeters waiting for Viet Cong or North Vietnamese forces to attack; they were actively seeking them in the field. Reporters could see for themselves that Americans were taking an increasingly wider role in combat.<sup>13</sup> Despite their own realization that the effort to downplay US involvement was failing, MACV still tried to make the policy work.

More evidence appeared to counter this policy as the War progressed. A magazine article on 14 August 1967 contradicted General Westmoreland's optimism. *Newsweek* published, "South Vietnamese troops all too often displayed stupendous ineptitude as well as a distressing reluctance to fight."<sup>14</sup> American forces were increasingly called on to support and rescue such units during combat. The *New York Times* responded to the effort to downplay American efforts by using the MACV commander's own words against him: "Every time Westmoreland makes a speech about how good the South Vietnamese Army is, I want to ask him why he keeps calling for more Americans."<sup>15</sup>

Another damaging article appeared on 17 September 1967, when Peter Arnett reported that South Vietnamese forces were not operating on the same schedule as American forces. While US troops were continuously on duty, South Vietnamese units habitually took Saturdays and Sundays off, even during periods when American forces were engaged in combat.<sup>16</sup> MACV public affairs personnel decided against rebutting such articles. Although public affairs officers disagreed vehemently with reporters' conclusion that South Vietnamese Army units were becoming increasingly ineffective, they believed that an official response would only attract additional attention to the issue.<sup>17</sup>

By 2 January 1968, Admiral Ulysses S.G. Sharp, the US Pacific Command Commander, agreed that attempts to publicize South Vietnamese accomplishments had only served to draw attention to problems that their forces were encountering. He suggested that MACV needed to concentrate more on increasing the effectiveness of South Vietnamese government operations. Further, he added that public affairs officers needed to exercise more care in selecting which South Vietnamese military units it

recommended for the media to examine.<sup>18</sup> This admittance that some South Vietnamese forces would not be able to acquit themselves in combat showed clearly that American officials knew their statements on this issue were either false or misleading. Having knowledge that they were not honestly reporting the situation was the antithesis of pre-war information policy. Many reporters were not swayed by MACV attempts to steer them towards selected units and continued to find problems in the field. Reporters had come to realize that MACV was directing them away from troubled units and were thus more apt to visit units that were not recommended in order to find more interesting stories and prove military officers wrong.

Despite an intensive effort to boost the standing of South Vietnamese participation in the war, disparaging stories continued to appear in the American press. MACV acknowledged these problems in its annual command history; "There was a rather wide acceptance in the US of a false impression of Vietnamese incompetence. Many in America believed that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was not carrying its fair share of combat duties. Much of this problem arose from press reports and comments of visitors to South Vietnam which derogated the willingness and capability of the ARVN to fight. Some press reports cited comments to that effect by unnamed American military men."<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, the command history was also very positive in its overall outlook on the future.

MACV continually attempted to temper news stories that reflected poorly either on the South Vietnamese government or that would embarrass President Johnson.<sup>20</sup> General Westmoreland personally called the president of CBS news after finding out that they were going to broadcast a potentially disparaging story. While unable to prevent

broadcast of the story, he was able to provide additional perspective in order to downplay some of the more controversial aspects of the piece.<sup>21</sup> None of the CBS stories' facts were disputed; only the interpretation presented in the story was questioned.

MACV's attempt to downplay American participation in the war was probably doomed from the start. American reporters were naturally interested in the story of US forces fighting in the war. Additionally, reporters were still tied to profit motives of their parent news organizations. These news organizations demanded stories of interest to their readers, and foreign wars did not qualify for this. This requirement naturally drove reporters to emphasize the commitment and actions of US troops above other stories.

#### Painting a Rosy Picture, June 1965

The military searched for ways to employ all means of power to combat North Vietnamese and Viet-Cong forces operating in South Vietnam. US Air Force B-52 bombers were tested against enemy supply dumps, bunkers and personnel. After initial tests on 20 June 1965, MACV officials, under advice of Pentagon officials, played up the success of this effort by detailing assumed enemy casualties and equipment destruction figures for which they had no independent confirmation. Later, MACV received more accurate and less favorable assessments of the air strikes from ground assessment teams. Instead of immediately disclosing the updated information, MACV continued to portray the mission as an unqualified success. It was as if MACV had decided to hide the failure behind a mass of distorted facts and qualifications.<sup>22</sup> This situation was exposed when reporters accompanying the ground survey force reported the actual results related to the air strikes.

Admiral Sharp realized that implementing a policy that accepted the distortion of facts was unsustainable for military public affairs personnel. Sharp understood that media policy needed to be adjusted. In an 11 September 1965 memorandum to General Westmoreland, he stated, “We can get away with concealing from the press some of the time but by no means all of the time. . . . A lack of credibility could cause problems far more serious than results from the revelation of occasional mistakes. MACV might from time to time omit from its announcements some of the incidents which we would prefer not to have known.”<sup>23</sup> General Westmoreland agreed. The Department of Defense also concurred with this new policy and insisted that military commanders and their spokesmen join civilian leaders in promoting and defending the Johnson Administration’s policy of countering negative news stories.<sup>24</sup>

President Johnson stressed placing events in a favorable light even further by ordering General Westmoreland to amass statistics that demonstrated that the war was succeeding. These statistics were easily manipulated according to the agenda and views of the people producing them.<sup>25</sup> Another consequence of placing inordinate emphasis on statistics was that the military attempted to reduce every action into measurable terms. This turned combat into a numbers game. Military actions were taken out of their context and lost wider meaning. Simply put, “The biggest trouble with numbers was that they were often wrong.”<sup>26</sup> In a meeting with key advisors, President Johnson sought consensus for the use of statistics to portray progress in the direction of the war. His national security advisor, Walt Rostow, agreed and stated, “There are ways of guiding the press to show light at the end of the tunnel.”<sup>27</sup> This guidance reinforced the policies

within MACV. It required public affairs spokesmen to massage statistics and battlefield actions in order to present Vietnam in a favorable manner.

From March to April 1966, American newspapers ran articles on General Westmoreland's alleged lack of confidence in Marine Corps units in Vietnam. *Los Angeles Times* correspondent William Tuohy wrote that Marine battalions were under-strength, poorly supplied and that their chain of command had been confused during combat operations. General Westmoreland placed his deputy, General Abrams, in charge of rectifying the situation. He found that the story was very close to the facts. Regardless, General Westmoreland dismissed the story as an attempt by the media to generate news. This despite his own memorandum dated 22 January 1966, where he had himself questioned the Marine's professionalism and abilities.<sup>28</sup> MACV information officers managed to divert a number of negative stories concerning interservice rivalry by stating that they were only a problem at the lowest tactical levels. They reiterated this by stating that the relationship between the services at command levels was harmonious.<sup>29</sup> This did not dissuade all reporters from sticking with the theme. Donald Kirk reported that Army officers were disgusted with the performance of Marines in the field. These officers had told Kirk, "Marines were seeing shadows outside the wire and wouldn't even go out to pick up their dead."<sup>30</sup> Reporters did not believe public affairs officers when they were told that everything was okay. They investigated stories and published facts that they found at the lowest levels of the military. Often the perspective from the individual soldier level was much different from that of MACV in Saigon.

Reporters' response to the policy of painting a "rosy picture" of the war was predictable. This response was similar to responses reporters had to previous public



affairs initiatives. Reporters gained knowledge of stories from their private field sources, Communist propaganda stations or from leaks within the military. MACV spokesmen were then unable to gain any initiative over those stories. “Unaware of what the reporter would say until it appeared in print, official spokesmen met each new revelation as it came.”<sup>31</sup> If public affairs officers had been more candid about incidents up-front, they would have deflected criticism and eliminated the appearance of a cover-up.

Jonathan Randal, a reporter with *The New York Times*, noted that MACV was exaggerating its emphasis on enemy combat losses. On 6 May 1967, he published an article on the US Marine capture of a hill after a twelve-day siege. General Westmoreland “spoke of tremendous casualties suffered by the 95th and 18th Regiments of North Vietnamese 325th Division. American spokesmen said that they had lost 570 confirmed dead, with 598 more deaths listed as probable. But General Westmoreland said nothing about casualties in the two Marine battalions, officially given as 160 dead and 746 wounded.”<sup>32</sup> Doris Kearns of the *Atlantic Monthly* concurred with this perception. “As the military increased its involvement and responsibility, errors in reporting became standard operating procedure. Exaggerated descriptions of American success were matched by diluted reports of North Vietnamese strength. The estimates of progress improved with each step of the journey from Army headquarters in Vietnam to the situation room in the White House.”<sup>33</sup> MACV was unable to convince reporters of positive results through stated claims alone. Reporters at this time were skeptical of any position presented by the public affairs section in Saigon.

The media also began to tear apart statistics being disseminated from MACV headquarters. Reporters began to believe, as 1967 progressed, that enemy body counts

being submitted were not independently verifiable. They believed that casualty counts were being inflated as they rose through chains of command. Kill ratios, highly touted as a measure of military success over the Viet Cong, varied greatly depending on where units were stationed in the country. Richard Hardwood of the *Washington Post* noted simply “the war just doesn’t add up.”<sup>34</sup>

MACV, in its own internal correspondence, recognized that there were problems with using statistics to emphasize progress in the war. On 6 February 1967, MACV public affairs officers convened a special conference in an attempt to clarify military statistics being compiled in Vietnam. The conference produced new and standardized definitions for what constituted an engagement or battle and how they were to be officially recorded. After reaching consensus, MACV officials ran afoul of the Johnson Administration and higher military headquarters. The number of enemy attacks, based on their new definitions, was revised significantly upward. Realizing that this would appear as a significant escalation (even though no actual change in numbers had occurred), General Westmoreland decided to withhold this information from the press.<sup>35</sup> Over time, these statistics were leaked to reporters. The new numbers were published and did cause a significant amount of public concern. MACV’s concealment of the information failed to achieve Westmoreland’s goals.

MACV’s published statistics may have overestimated the number of enemy killed in action and amounts of supplies being captured, and there were several reasons for this. Enemy forces initiated most engagements in South Vietnam. During these attacks, their forces used hit and run tactics, and subsequently American forces seldom were able to inflict large numbers of casualties. Additionally, enemy forces removed some of their

casualties from the battlefield. “The result was that while Military Advisory Command claimed 55,000 enemy killed in action during 1966 at best 19,500 could be accounted for.”<sup>36</sup> Even if such estimates were accurate, reporters were unwilling to accept them without more definitive, and objective, proof. Reporters immediately assumed that American public affairs officers were attempting to mislead them.

Statistical measurements and the conclusions they supported were generally quite favorable to MACV’s claims. However, there was an increasing disparity between MACV’s reports and those formulated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). While not completely false in their assertions, MACV’s internal reporting methodology accounted for some discrepancies. An example was that the military considered all dead bodies found in the vicinity of an engagement as enemy and included them in MACV’s numbers, while the CIA counted only those bodies that were found possessing weapons.<sup>37</sup> In response to this evidence, General Sidle, the MACV information officer, informed General Westmoreland on 11 September 1967 that he intended to de-emphasize body counts in future statements.<sup>38</sup> Sidle understood that reporters would find out about the discrepancies and would immediately seize upon them for their stories. This put MACV into a poor position, as body counts had been the most touted metric of success. By abandoning them, it appeared to reporters that something negative had occurred in the American position.

Under mounting public pressure to show results from the war effort, President Johnson ordered General Westmoreland to Washington to give a progress report. Upon his return from Vietnam, Westmoreland dutifully announced that, despite hard fighting yet to come, a turning point had arrived in the war of attrition. Losses to the NVA and

Vietcong were no longer sustainable.<sup>39</sup> This statement ignored the fact that North Vietnamese citizens were reaching military age in greater numbers than their losses. Additionally, although enemy casualties were mounting, attrition was not changing the overall political situation in South Vietnam. Communist forces continued to exercise more effective control of the countryside than Saigon's government did. The aerial bombardment campaign was not slowing infiltration of North Vietnamese military units and supplies. Noting these trends, Secretary McNamara privately questioned General Westmoreland's optimistic assessments and concluded that the war could drag on indefinitely. Even so, he maintained a public show of confidence and support to the President.<sup>40</sup> Once again, military and civilian officials were reporting one set of facts to the public while privately discussing a different reality.

Another fact appeared in August of 1967 that contradicted the rosy picture being portrayed from MACV headquarters. Revised estimates of enemy forces in South Vietnam were made that were substantially higher than previous estimates. General Creighton W. Abrams Jr., MACV deputy commander, cabled the information to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and informed them that MACV wanted to summarily reduce the new estimate of enemy forces by 120,000 – 130,000 troops. In the cable, Abrams expressed concern that if higher estimates of enemy forces were released, reporters would immediately seize on that number and draw "the erroneous and gloomy conclusion as to the meaning of the increase", that Communist forces were expanding and not decreasing as MACV had implied. Later in the cable, he stated that Joe Fried of the *New York Daily News* had learned of the true intelligence estimates and that MACV public affairs officers were trying to convince him that the figures were wrong.<sup>41</sup> The implementation of this

reduction was made via press handouts at the weekly briefings. In an instant, one fourth of the enemy was taken out of the fight.

Two more incidents emerged which continued to discredit MACV's rosy picture public image campaign. Operations CRIMP and MASTIFF were conducted throughout January and February 1966. These missions were highlighted by MACV as examples of progress in Vietnam. The 173rd Airborne Brigade and elements of the 1st Infantry Division conducted operation CRIMP north of Saigon in January. The American effort was preceded by large-scale B-52 strikes on suspected enemy forces and supply concentrations. CRIMP's objective was to destroy a complex of bunkers and tunnels believed to house a major VC command and logistics center along with two 800-man guerilla battalions. The after action report of the 173rd claimed the action to be a great success. However, skeptical media stories following the battle reported that MACV units had fired over 7,000 rounds of artillery, received 171 sorties of USAF aircraft, including multiple B-52 strikes, and lost fifteen Americans and eight Australians killed in action. In exchange for this expenditure in resources, allied forces had a confirmed body count of 128 Viet Cong, captured 91 weapons ranging from a homemade shotgun to two AK47s, 100,000 pages of documents and 57 tons of rice. Additionally, more than 1,000 civilians had been displaced from the area and lost their homes.<sup>42</sup>

Operation MASTIFF also consumed large amounts of resources. The 1st Infantry Division moved into areas near the Michelin rubber plantation, near Dau Tieng Vietnam, in February. The American force used over 1,000 helicopter sorties, nearly 100 C-123 airlifts, 197 fighter-bomber missions and the entire divisional artillery to accomplish MASTIFF. At a cost of seventeen US Soldiers killed and 91 wounded, the division

reported sixty-one enemy dead, six captured, no enemy weapons found, and a large quantity of miscellaneous supplies destroyed.<sup>43</sup> Both operations, touted as remarkable successes by MACV, were indicative of Vietnam. In the minds of reporters, large amounts of resources were expended for questionable results.

The rosy picture policy came to a zenith in December of 1967. MACV attempted to demonstrate progress in South Vietnam to a delegation of reporters and visiting US Congressmen. South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky accompanied the delegation down the entire length of Highway 1, the country's main thoroughfare. American troops were ordered to secure the entire highway during the trip, and as soon as the delegation passed, US troops were withdrawn. Enemy forces quickly resumed control of many sections of the highway.<sup>44</sup> Reporters exposed this charade through leaks from their sources inside MACV.

The Tet Offensive sank MACV's policy of painting rosy pictures. There had been adequate early intelligence of an enemy effort planned for the Tet holiday of 1968. This intelligence was pieced together by a small, classified group of intelligence officers in Saigon. The possibility of attacks was known among reporters, who had heard rumors that something big might happen during the Tet holiday. The press in Saigon had been briefed about the military's indications of an offensive on a background basis beginning in December 1967. Both Generals Wheeler and Westmoreland had also mentioned the possibility of a Communist offensive publicly in speeches. Despite all of these indications, there is no question that the American public and many political leaders were taken by surprise. After consultations between the State Department and MACV, the military decided not to aggressively publicize the possibility of enemy attacks based on

the Johnson Administrations' claims that all was going well.<sup>45</sup> Veiled warnings and background information to reporters had only served to downplay public preparedness for the Tet Offensive.

American forces were prepared for the Viet Cong attacks and decimated their formations. Unfortunately, reporters saw the Tet Offensive as flying in the face of all the favorable announcements and quickly labeled it a disaster. This perception was passed on to the American public. As one reporter stated later, "To be fair, the media was put in the position of having to balance the evidence of their eyes against the false sense of security and optimism peddled by the military and the administration."<sup>46</sup> The MACV public affairs office was suffering the effects of the lack of credibility they had created with reporters.

As the fog of war lifted and the Communist defeat became apparent, managers of the press, and especially television news, put the accent on more melodrama rather than trying to update the invariably sensational first impressions of the battle. After four weeks, *Time*, *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* began to publish a few such recovery stories, but never on the front page.<sup>47</sup> The first impression of reporters remained and attempts to correct it were ineffective. By the time corrections were made, the Tet Offensive story no longer held news value. General Sidle recalled that MACV's spotty credibility was obviously a factor in this, not helped by erroneous early reports of the recapture of Hue.<sup>48</sup>

#### Zorthian's New Ground Rules, July 1965

In parallel with MACV's attempts to paint a rosy picture of the situation in Southeast Asia, Barry Zorthian recognized that reporters played a central role in the war

and that all sides used them. Reporters were given information with the motive of seeing a particular story reach publication. These stories originated from the government, military, critics, South Vietnamese, by Hanoi, and by other reporters.<sup>49</sup> Recognizing that MACV had little control over how reporters would use any information provided to them, Zorthian decided it would be prudent to limit specific information that could be used against the American military's position. On 12 July 1965, he decided to formalize ground rules by which MACV released specific types of information to reporters.

Military leaders were concerned that casualty figures were being used by North Vietnamese to verify the success of their tactics, techniques, and procedures. The political leadership was concerned that public opinion was suffering from the casualty figures of individual battles. In response, Zorthian directed that public affairs spokesmen would announce casualties only on a weekly basis. MACV no longer gave losses associated with any particular engagement, as those losses were officially deemed as useful information to enemy forces. Finally, and most controversially with reporters, casualties were only to be categorized as light, moderate, or heavy.

This characterization of casualties drew an immediate response from reporters. They requested to know what criteria officials were using to determine differences in levels of casualties. Zorthian's reply to reporters was that no exact measurement was possible.<sup>50</sup> MACV officials were willing to discuss exact numbers off the record, in order to allow reporters to understand their context, but did not want any details published. Zorthian explained to reporters that this policy was necessary for security reasons. However, it also lent itself to speculation as to the meaning behind official announcements. Light casualties to a battalion in contact may be heavy casualties to a



platoon. Without objective quantification, reporters were free to use their own (sometimes incorrect) judgment to characterize battles.

MACV's casualty characterization announcement process was not tenable. As casualty figures were released by MACV, reporters speculated on both the nature and severity of operations being conducted. Reporters knew specific numbers of casualties on background and a general characteristic of the battle. They attempted to compare numbers of casualties to the size of the unit and determine how serious the engagement had been. *Newsweek* commented that this policy could easily lead to manipulation of casualty figures by the military.<sup>51</sup> Hoping to reduce this speculation, MACV announced on 28 August 1965 that it would end the practice of revealing specific American and South Vietnamese casualty figures in background.<sup>52</sup> Without specific numbers, even on background, official announcements of casualties became meaningless. Reporters worked harder to find out such details from anonymous sources and soldiers in the field, figures which were usually inaccurate.

MACV officials recognized that the policy of announcing casualties on a "light/moderate/heavy" basis had damaged their standing with reporters. After 7 March 1967, public affairs officers changed their position again and began announcing specific casualty figures for significant combat actions if the disclosure would pose no threat to the units involved.<sup>53</sup> This change improved the command's credibility with reporters. By admitting that announcing specific casualty figures was not a violation of security, MACV admitted that their earlier position was incorrect, a fact that was not lost on reporters. Also, reporters were concerned that MACV would still withhold information

based on arbitrary interpretation of what constituted a threat to units involved in combat and what was considered a “significant” combat action.

Public affairs policy makers recognized that, more often than not, the press was more accurate in covering situations in South Vietnam than official government public statements – at least until the Tet Offensive. Yet, MACV’s leadership realized that far too often in critical issues, there were stories that contained inaccuracies, distortions and misinterpretations.<sup>54</sup> With their lack of credibility firmly established, there was little that public affairs officers could do to correct reporters’ errors.

Finally, MACV intended to use the ground rules to control the timing of the release of reporters’ stories. Newsmen were reminded that MACV headquarters was the sole releasing authority in South Vietnam for US military news. Even though lower level enlisted men or officers disclosed information that was not releasable under the ground rules, it was not to be used until officially released in Saigon.<sup>55</sup> By insisting on this delay from the time reporters discovered facts in the field until details were released in Saigon, public affairs officers attempted to prevent reporters from publishing stories that reflected poorly on the military before senior officials had time to formulate a response. This technique proved unsuccessful since reporters had access to their own communication methods and did not feel obligated to follow the rules.

### Summary

MACV’s attempts to conceal the expanding American military participation in Vietnam were ineffective. Public affairs officers realized reporters refused to believe information that they were distributing. Internal reports and correspondence indicated that senior military leaders knew the true situation was not being reported. Instead,

MACV followed the Johnson Administration's desire to limit the impact of the war on his domestic agenda and attempted to mislead the press.

Barry Zorthian understood the dangers of losing the media's trust and support. As the chief information officer, he formulated a coherent and viable strategy, his experience told him that it was not advisable to mislead or lie to reporters. He believed establishing firm ground rules, within which military and media personnel were bound, would force each side to accommodate the other's needs. However, the inability of MACV to articulate detailed information that reporters could understand in its proper context doomed the policy to failure.

In attempting to implement a policy of painting a rosy picture, MACV planted the seeds for disaster. Counterinsurgency warfare is unpredictable in its nature and does not proceed along any set timelines. The military allowed reporters' unrealistic expectations to dictate its portrayal of progress in Vietnam and felt compelled to downplay any setbacks. An emphasis on statistics became a driving factor in establishing success of American efforts. As time passed, these statistics became skewed away from reality. Reporters began to feel as if the war was becoming a vicious circle. Their frustration was aptly summed up by Neil Sheehan, "Once a battle has ended, the Americans and South Vietnamese troops withdraw. The theoretical follow-up by South Vietnamese forces, police and administrators does not materialize except in a few instances. The Viet Cong return and the battle plays out again."<sup>56</sup>

The Tet Offensive created a divide between the military and civilian leadership. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker was upset with Westmoreland because he felt that military leaders had failed to properly prepare the public for the scope of the battle that was

fought. However, it was not the responsibility of the military to prepare the public for the political ramifications of combat. As Neil Sheehan observed, “Bunker did not yet realize the complete extent of the psychological victory the Vietnamese Communists had won in the United States.”<sup>57</sup> This victory would have a great impact upon the conduct of the remainder of the war.

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<sup>1</sup>David L. Anderson, *The Vietnam War* (New York: Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2005), 47.

<sup>2</sup>Morley Safer, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 161.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>4</sup>Peter Brush, “What Really Happened at Cam Ne,” *Vietnam* 16, no. 2 (August 2003): 33.

<sup>5</sup>William H. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1988), 162.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>7</sup>US Army, *MACV Command History 67* (Saigon, Vietnam: US Army, 1968), 960.

<sup>8</sup>Jim Lucas, “Fighting at A Shau,” *Washington Daily News*, 14 March 1966.

<sup>9</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 259.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>11</sup>Perry Merton, “Their Lions, Our Rabbits,” *Newsweek*, 9 October 1967, 44.

<sup>12</sup>Jeffrey J. Clarke, *US Army in Vietnam Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 113.

<sup>13</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 164.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 297

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>Peter Arnett, "South Vietnamese Army Fights Five and One Half Day Weeks," *Washington Post*, 17 September 1967.

<sup>17</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 299.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>19</sup>US Army, *MACV Command History* 67, 959.

<sup>20</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 264.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 264

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>24</sup>Peter Braestrup, *Battle Lines: Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Military and the Media* (New York: Priority Press Publications, 1985), 63.

<sup>25</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, p45.

<sup>26</sup>Alan Hooper, *The Military and the Media* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Gower, 1982), 112.

<sup>27</sup>David L. Anderson, *The Vietnam War* (New York: Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2005), 58.

<sup>28</sup>William H. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 122.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>30</sup>Donald Kirk, "The Army-Marine Feud," *Washington Star*, 14 March 1968.

<sup>31</sup>Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 97.

<sup>32</sup>Jonathan Randal, "US Marines Sieze 3d Hill in Vietnam After 12 Day Push," *New York Times*, 6 May 1967.

<sup>33</sup>Doris Kearns, *Reporting Vietnam, Part Two: American Journalism, 1969-1975* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 212.

<sup>34</sup>Richard Hardwood, "The War Just Doesn't Add Up," *Washington Post*, 3 Septmeber 1967.

<sup>35</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 281.

- <sup>36</sup>Ibid., 318.
- <sup>37</sup>Larry E. Cable, *Unholy Grail: The US and the Wars in Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 173.
- <sup>38</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 318.
- <sup>39</sup>Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, 59.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., 52.
- <sup>41</sup>Morley Safer, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 162.
- <sup>42</sup>Cable, *Unholy Grail: The US and the Wars in Vietnam*, 42.
- <sup>43</sup>Ibid., 44.
- <sup>44</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 337.
- <sup>45</sup>Peter Jesser and Peter R. Young, *The Media and the Military: From the Crimea to Desert Strike* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 90.
- <sup>46</sup>Ibid., 91.
- <sup>47</sup>Peter Breastup, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 167.
- <sup>48</sup>Winant Sidle, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 165.
- <sup>49</sup>Barry Zorthian, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 137.
- <sup>50</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 179.
- <sup>51</sup>"Moderation in All," *Newsweek*, 6 December 1965, 42.
- <sup>52</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, 205.
- <sup>53</sup>Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 98.
- <sup>54</sup>Barry Zorthian, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 137.
- <sup>55</sup>US Army, *MACV Command History 68* (Saigon, Vietnam: US Army, 1969), 943.

<sup>56</sup>Neil Sheehan, *Reporting Vietnam, Part One: American Journalism, 1959-1969* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 298.

<sup>57</sup> Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York: Random House, 1988), 720.

## CHAPTER 4

### IGNORE THEM AND THEY WILL GO AWAY

The full impact of Tet Offensive reporting on the military media relationship was still being measured as General Abrams replaced General Westmoreland in command of MACV. President Johnson had ordered MACV to downplay military operations within Vietnam in order to facilitate peace talks with the North Vietnamese in Paris. Aware that those negotiations would be long and difficult; General Abrams understood that MACV needed to continue to pressure the enemy in order to force them to proceed with peace talks. Abram's dilemma was between the need to maintain allied morale and offensive momentum while avoiding any situations that would give aid and support to war critics and disrupt the Paris peace negotiations.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the more charismatic and media hungry Westmoreland, General Abrams did not like to engage reporters, preferring to ignore them whenever possible. As Peter Arnett wrote, "General Abrams solved the press problems by totally ignoring us."<sup>2</sup> More significantly, General Abrams understood that some of his subordinates were adding to public affairs problems by leaking sensitive information to reporters. He knew that some were motivated by disagreements with official policies while others had clearly acted out of disagreement over levels of secrecy maintained by MACV.<sup>3</sup> Abram's attempt to embargo news stories met with immediate hostility from the Saigon press corps and utterly failed.

The American plan to transition out of military participation in the war was known as Vietnamization. General Abrams was constantly challenged to maintain US honor while removing his command from battle. Reporters began to feel that their



predictions of disaster were coming to fruition and they became more critical of American transfer of responsibility to the South Vietnamese armed forces. This hostile environment prevailed until the end of the war.

#### Let the Results Speak for Themselves, May 1968

After taking command and sizing up the military-media relations situation in South Vietnam, General Abrams established a new direction for public affairs policy. Abrams did not want MACV to deal in propaganda exercises in any way. He preferred to down play all military activities in order to generate as little press as possible. He ordered his subordinate commanders to exercise more use of the words “no comment”, as many careless conversations had wound up in reporters’ dispatches. Abrams completed his new policy guidance by stating, “Effective now, the overall public affairs policy of this command will be to let the results speak for themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

General Abrams’ media policy was quickly put to the test. At Cu Chi, enemy forces penetrated the headquarters area of the 25th Infantry division on 9 May 1968, destroying nine large transport helicopters and damaging many other pieces of equipment. Reporters at the scene had seen the damage, but MACV, in keeping with the low-key policy, never announced the action. Charles Mohr, one of the reporters that covered the battle, noted “despite the damage inflicted, officials in Saigon had said nothing about the incident and briefers had only confirmed it in response to direct questioning from dedicated, investigative reporters.”<sup>5</sup> The new policy allowed reporters more speculation about events. Reporters, by this point in the war, understood how to ascertain details of combat from low ranking participants. Those reporters generally were more opposed to the military’s conduct of operations. They perceived the lack of

forthrightness from official sources as evidence of a cover-up by MACV. Even though reporters had most facts correct in their stories, MACV public affairs spokesmen were hardly trying to commit a cover-up of the actions. They were only complying with General Abrams's directions to let the war speak for itself.<sup>6</sup>

On 6 August 1969, this policy again haunted MACV. Several Special Forces officers were arrested following accusations that they had murdered a Vietnamese double agent. Instead of being forthcoming with such sensational accusations, MACV decided to not publish any information. When rumors appeared that a *New York Times* reporter was inquiring about the case, public affairs officers issued a brief statement containing only essential information. By failing to divulge all pertinent information up front, MACV immediately drew reporters' interest to the situation. The resultant reporters' investigations into the case sensationalized it as "the Green Beret Affair." Lacking any official, authoritative statements, reporters turned to unofficial sources and began publishing rumors. The resultant publicity tainted the case beyond all measure and all charges were eventually dropped.<sup>7</sup> The military was unable to gain the initiative in these cases because of its restrictive policy. Failing to address reporters' concerns failed to make the problems disappear.

In another incident exemplifying the futility of ignoring the press, President Richard M. Nixon admitted that US forces were executing bombing missions in Laos during an 8 December 1969 press conference in Washington. With such official revelations, MACV public affairs officers should have anticipated that reporters would seek additional information. The administration directed that if reporters sought this information, public affairs spokesmen were to allow President Nixon's statement to speak

for itself.<sup>8</sup> This had the effect of pushing reporters away from official spokesmen into their backchannel sources, with their associated lack of authority and unknown level of veracity. Even though reporters were already disenchanted with the military command in Saigon, it was not useful to refuse to provide them with information. MACV was losing all influence over the media.

Letting the results speak for themselves became an issue again when soldiers' drug use in Vietnam began to increase. Reporters initiated a detailed investigation of the problem. Although MACV forthrightly admitted that marijuana smoking was the second most widespread criminal offense in Vietnam, it refused to answer questions over the extent of the matter.<sup>9</sup> The military failed to take the initiative with what could only become a public affairs problem as reporters' interest rose. This decision caused MACV considerable adverse publicity. On 21 April 1969, *Newsweek* published an expose indicating that illegal drug use was so widespread in South Vietnam that it had created virtual subcultures within some units. The story went on to quote one Soldier that after returning from a mission, "The men showered and shaved and ate a hot meal in the mess hall. Then when the sun went down, about two hundred of us went into the nearest field and had a damn good smoke. But the scene was pure marijuana rather than Marlboro country."<sup>10</sup> Firsthand accounts directly contradicted those minimal statements being distributed from MACV headquarters. By not addressing the issues, MACV failed to show the bigger picture and allowed the reporters' stories to frame the public's perception of the Army.

As soon as reporters began inquiring about drug use, it was clear that MACV would need to truthfully explain the full extent of the problem. By allowing statistics to

speaking for themselves and ignoring questions from reporters, public affairs officers only seemed disingenuous and dismissive of the problem. This perception by reporters continued to enhance the lack of credibility that MACV possessed with reporters.

#### Vietnamization, January 1969

After Nixon was inaugurated as president in January 1969, he initiated a policy of slow disengagement from the war. The goal of this policy was to gradually build up the South Vietnamese Army, so that it could fight the war on its own. The public goal of Vietnamization was to allow South Vietnamese army units to be increasingly effective on their own against the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army. The unstated goal of Vietnamization was that the burden of combat would be returned to ARVN troops and thereby lessen domestic opposition in America to the war. In preparation for this shift of responsibility, General Wheeler directed MACV to examine its procedures to determine what actions could be taken to improve the visibility and image of South Vietnamese military forces. Thus, for the third time, MACV attempted to convince the media that the war was primarily a South Vietnamese show.

General Wheeler directed the implementation of three main tasks to accomplish this goal. First, he directed MACV to highlight the participation of South Vietnamese forces in American operations, especially those where they performed well. Next, he directed MACV to focus on publishing stories about districts where ARVN troops had replaced US forces and were effectively combating the Communists. Finally, he directed MACV to publicize the modernization of equipment within the South Vietnamese military to show the increase in their capabilities. Additionally, Wheeler wanted MACV to develop a series of over-arching reports for correspondents that covered all of these

areas, emphasizing increasing success with Vietnamization efforts.<sup>11</sup> General Wheeler's efforts were focused on setting the conditions for the eventual withdrawal of US forces.

In response to General Wheeler's directives, MACV's chief information officer, Colonel L. Gordon Hill, initiated an effort to promote Vietnamization through periodic background briefings to reporters. MACV redoubled its efforts to arrange tours and special events for reporters at events that publicized and showcased South Vietnamese military accomplishments.<sup>12</sup> This shift was a direct result of pressure from Washington on General Wheeler to de-emphasize American efforts.<sup>13</sup> Reporters immediately took note of the change in policy. Once the military had established its policy of Vietnamization, it relentlessly pursued that policy, despite evidence that contradicted its claims. Concurrently, MACV revised its policy for announcing American operations in progress. Instead of releasing the names and details of all on-going operations, only those operations deemed of 'substantial news value' were to be released. Once again, public affairs officers were unable to give reporters a clear definition of their policy, in this case what "substantial" meant.

One example of counter-productive public relations in regards to Vietnamization came during the battle of Ben Het in June 1969. MACV briefing officers highlighted the successful defense of a South Vietnamese military garrison from a large-scale attack. Spokesmen specifically highlighted the fact that no American ground forces had been present. Skeptical reporters immediately investigated MACV's claims. Instead of agreeing with Saigon's assessment of the operation, reporters highlighted the participation of American supporting arms, such as artillery and aviation. They reported that the attached field artillery unit was short both ammunition and water. "The artillery

men feel they are being sacrificed in an experiment which, from the Ben Het viewpoint, seems to be failing.”<sup>14</sup> The impression that reporters received from Ben Hut was that ARVN forces still required massive American support to succeed. Despite later revelations that the artillery’s supply situation was not as dire as first reported, the initial perception of failure remained.

More reporters concurred with this pessimistic view. Drummond Ayers of the *New York Times* concluded that Ben Het demonstrated the inability of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to stand alone, if only because it highlighted that South Vietnamese officers lacked aggressiveness and imagination.<sup>15</sup> *Newsweek* added that when the commander of the ARVN at the battle claimed he had been victorious by tricking the enemy into a kill zone, an American advisor disgustingly replied, “Who is he kidding?”<sup>16</sup> The media remained unconvinced that Vietnamization could succeed.

The American military was also frustrated by the slow progress of Vietnamization. This frustration was not lost on reporters. Despite all of the official statements about progress from MACV, internal observations concluded that ARVN forces were improving slowly and that a long investment in their training by US forces was required. Reporters capitalized on military leaks and discovered this dichotomy between public statements and internal observations. “Vietnamization was to emerge as the ultimate in cynical self-delusion and public relations image making. Under this concept, the world was asked to believe that what could not be done by the mightiest military power on Earth could be achieved by the weaker South Vietnamese Army.”<sup>17</sup>

South Vietnam’s greatest test of independent ground combat operations came during the Laotian invasion of 1971, also known as Lam Son 719. The ARVN plan for

Lam Son 719 involved an attack by the 1st Airborne Division and the 1st Armored Brigade along Highway 9 to Aloui and then on to Tchepone, where Highway 9 intersected the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>18</sup> The attack into Laos was initiated on 8 February 1971 from forward staging bases established on the Khe Sanh Plain.<sup>19</sup> Even though this operation involved massive American air and long-range artillery support, it did not involve any US ground forces.

This attack should have been a showcase for the Vietnamization policy. However, reporters were virtually stymied in their attempt to cover the action.<sup>20</sup> Reporters, who did succeed in entering Laos, were not impressed by positive statements about the ARVN's performance being generated by MACV in Saigon. They had seen and interviewed Vietnamese soldiers and their American advisors in the field, and those interviews directly contradicted MACV's more positive reports. The *New York Times* reported, "The morale of many soldiers in South Vietnam's finest military units, who fought the North Vietnamese in Laos, is shattered. It was a test, and now most South Vietnamese veterans frankly admit that their forces failed."<sup>21</sup>

During the battle, public affairs officers attempted to illustrate Lam Son's success by holding up a piece of pipe during a press conference. The briefer claimed that the pipe was seized from North Vietnamese petroleum supply lines during the invasion. However, reporters discovered that the pipe was not actually seized during the invasion. The Secretary of Defense acknowledged that spokesmen had used misleading evidence to illustrate progress during the Laotian invasion.<sup>22</sup> This display was just another instance of surrendering credibility in order to maintain the appearance of Vietnamization's progress.

By continuing to push its optimism of South Vietnamese progress, MACV further alienated the media. Reporters described the withdrawal of South Vietnamese forces from Laos as a debacle. Pessimistic reports of the invasion were filed back to American papers. The *Boston Globe* noted, “When the South Vietnamese pull out six weeks early, that is not a success. One does not expect, in time of war, the total honesty of the late General Joseph ‘Vinegar Joe’ Stillwell who declared after Burma in World War II, ‘I claim we got a hell of a beating, and it was damned humiliating.’ But there is no excuse for concealing from Americans and the South Vietnamese peasants the facts known only too well in Hanoi.”<sup>23</sup>

MACV felt that the facts did not support the media’s version of events, since in the official version of events, units withdrew in orderly fashion with all of their weapons. However, public affairs officers did not emphasize this fact until later when it was too late to refute the impression left by negative news stories. In response, Admiral Moorer instructed General Abrams to create specialized, “flash” reports in the future to convey unusual activities to the press in order to counter negative impressions.<sup>24</sup> The military’s version of events directly contradicted many eyewitness accounts and interviews given to reporters in which ARVN units panicked, fleeing without weapons and nearly dragging down helicopters by clinging to their skids.

The success of Vietnamization was further undermined by poor ARVN performance in several areas of combat service support. In areas such as quartermaster, ordnance, and depot maintenance, Vietnamization lacked central direction, as American forces had traditionally accomplished these roles. MACV made claims of improvement in South Vietnamese military effectiveness reinforced by statistics (such as tons of supplies



delivered). Such claims were deceptive as they were only reflective of improvement in certain areas. The ability of South Vietnamese logistical units to perform supply management and distribution was weak, and this was to form the basis for their future force.<sup>25</sup> Though improvement was being made in certain areas, it was evident that overall, there was still much work to be done. MACV attempted to downplay Vietnamese failings in an attempt to show Vietnamization was successfully proceeding. Individual American logistical advisors noted these deficiencies and passed them on to reporters.

South Vietnam also suffered from a lack of quality military leadership. *New York Times* reporter Craig Whitney noted that, during incursions into Cambodia at the beginning of 1971, the death of a single vibrant leader could paralyze even an effective ARVN unit.<sup>26</sup> Political and cultural realities had prevented charismatic leaders from emerging. Those who did were often viewed as a threat to higher-ranking officers and political leaders. Such men were removed as quickly as possible to protect positions of power. This lack of leadership was especially critical at the junior officer and non-commissioned officer level. Vietnamization required leaders who were flexible and could take the initiative to defeat Communist actions. Although beginning to develop capable leaders, South Vietnamese military forces had not developed them in quantity or in depth, and reporters quickly picked up and reported it as a weakness.

Reporters visiting the South Vietnamese countryside also saw signs that contradicted MACV's optimism. "If the talk of Can Tho is Vietnamization, the visible evidence still bespeaks Americanization. The massive USO building near the center of town has just unveiled a new barbeque pit, dedicated with military honors."<sup>27</sup> American forces had dominated the country for so long that local people were not able to wean

themselves. Succinctly put, “A South Vietnamese colonel stated that ‘American Aid is like opium.’”<sup>28</sup> Public affairs officers continued to push a policy that supported Vietnamization that was disconnected from the perceptions of reporters in the country. MACV failed to respond to the issues being investigated by reporters and, instead, concentrated on those areas they deemed important. This failure to identify what reporters needed caused additional friction between the military and the media.

A distinct difference in quality and motivation developed between portions of the South Vietnamese armed forces. The Vietnamese Popular Self Defense Force received rave reviews from American advisors, while regular ARVN units were viewed as more of a mixed bag. Regular units only operated sporadically in the Delta area, and were not very aggressive in seeking out enemy forces in the mountains.<sup>29</sup> While popular forces were vital in protecting villages and settlements, clearly the burden of defeating the North Vietnamese fell on the regular army, which appeared unable to execute this duty. This was contrary to MACV’s official, optimistic statements. One reporter aptly summed up what the media had come to believe, “A stream of cautiously positive comments seemed to continuously emanate from official sources while the news circulating privately became darker by the day.”<sup>30</sup> Off the record, an unidentified high-level officer in MACV noted, “We could keep our present troop levels another 10 years and not win this war as long as the South Vietnamese Army and government fail to make the necessary moves to win.”<sup>31</sup> It was clear that militarily, Vietnamization was progressing slower than political optimism attempted to portray.

Reporters also continued to receive leaks from military sources in Saigon. The *Baltimore Sun* published an article based on a series of confidential MACV analyses

collectively known as the System for Evaluating the Effectiveness of the South Vietnamese Military. “The commands’ own evaluations confirmed a progressive decline in the fighting capabilities of the SV armed forces over the last year. Obviously this information is in marked contrast to the official line.”<sup>32</sup> Once again, reporters discovered internal military recognition of problems with Vietnamization. Still, public affairs policy demanded adherence to official optimism.

The policy of publicizing Vietnamization efforts continued to exaggerate progress in order to expedite the withdrawal of US troops. Despite steady increases in many areas of South Vietnam’s military performance, MACV was pressured by political realities in Washington to present better results than were actually being achieved. The entire policy failed because it suffered from expectations and demands that were unrealistic. With a lack of credibility that had been developed throughout the war, MACV public affairs officers were unable to convince reporters that official statements were factual. This was especially true as leaks appeared from military sources that contradicted those statements. Reporters were all too eager to investigate all aspects of military claims and publish any stories that discredited the military.

#### Low Key Approach, August 1969

The Nixon administration was determined to pursue peace talks with the Communists in Paris. In order to accomplish their objective, General Abrams realized that American forces in Vietnam must maintain a low-key approach to the war. Any significant activities would inflame public opinion and give propaganda material to the Communists.

General Wheeler cabled MACV and warned that careful handling of the news media was imperative. Reporters considered any new military operation as an escalation of the war, yet the peace talks could not proceed without continuing pressure on Communist forces in the field. All military operations were subjected to outside examination. This problem was an example, in his eyes, of conducting “war in a goldfish bowl.”<sup>33</sup> Military leaders were caught between their responsibility to conduct the war to a successful conclusion and pressure not to rock the boat.

George Newman, who had replaced Barry Zorthian in 1968 as the chief information officer in Vietnam, directed that MACV public affairs officers no longer give detailed background briefings for reporters. “Escape and evasion about sum up the attitude that most American officials in Vietnam have taken towards newsmen. Most of the time – an attitude not withstanding areas of guarded coexistence, generally consist of suspicion, distrust and sometimes outright animosity.”<sup>34</sup> The new policy let reporters find out for themselves or directed them towards specialists or South Vietnamese spokesmen who could help. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Robert Elegant noted, “Except for the few correspondents for whom briefings and backgrounders had displaced reality, the press corps seems to prefer the new policy. No longer feeling themselves subject to high pressure salesmanship, correspondents are more inclined to take low-keyed official reports more seriously.”<sup>35</sup> Public affairs officers ceased pressuring reporters with politically required optimism and allowed them to cover events on their own. While not truly in the spirit of openness and candor, this policy was closer to the solution presented in pre-war regulations.

Secretary of Defense Clark M. Clifford attributed the press's favorable response to continuing operations to Abrams' low-key approach to public affairs policy. The Secretary put his seal of approval on what would become the basic public affairs policy throughout the remainder of the war.<sup>36</sup> Reporters near Da Nang sensed that there had been a shift in public affairs policy and inquired to the Marine Corps officials stationed there. In response to a Marine Corps inquiry, MACV cabled Da Nang and noted that the effort to play down US operations hardly meant a change in policy in releasing news about significant operations to reporters. It simply meant that they should not go out of the way to publicize events that "did not contain substantial news value."<sup>37</sup> The clarification did not specify a difference between significant and unsubstantial news value. The intent was clearly to lower the discourse between the military and reporters. Despite the official denial, this was clearly a significant change in policy.

Another tactic that public affairs officials used to keep military operations low key was to conceal information within news releases. *New York Times* reporter Sydney Schanberg noted, "At one point I said that his press releases used a jargonized form of language that made the bombing sound like a clean surgical operation instead of the mess and horror that war actually is. He was polite but in his next sentence he talked of bombing from a 'surgical precision basis.' We were discussing two different realities."<sup>38</sup> Military acronyms and lexicon were more frequently used in official statements. Reporters, unfamiliar with the meanings of some words, were not always able to understand press releases, and information was concealed from those not wanting to work harder.

Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird added another dimension to the low-key policy. MACV had been the release point for most developments in Vietnam. With General Abrams' concurrence, the Secretary gave the Department of Defense in Washington more responsibility for explaining the war. This change in policy created problems for the public affairs section in MACV, as they lost standing in the eyes of reporters when news releases from Washington preempted their own announcements.<sup>39</sup> However, it did enable MACV to concentrate less on the political justification of operations and focus on its military aspects.

One significant example of their attempts to cope with bad publicity came in November 1969. An Army pilot discovered an American platoon murdering civilians in a village named My Lai on 16 March 1968. However, the story did not break in the media until 13 November 1969.<sup>40</sup> The revelation of events at My Lai clearly illustrated how MACV was adhering to the low key policy. Although full prosecution of all offenders and full disclosure of the details seemed to be the only recourse, the Army was still determined to avoid self-inflicted wounds. Instead of releasing the story from MACV or Washington, it released it at Fort Benning where the chief defendant, Second Lieutenant William L. Calley Jr., was being detained.<sup>41</sup> The failure to disclose the information fully and openly caused accusations of cover-ups against the Army.

Another instance of MACV following the low-key policy came when Peter Arnett published a story about an infantry company that on 12 August 1969 had refused orders to engage in a combat mission. This story elicited much excitement in the US papers, but received little response from MACV. Arnett was surprised that its revelation did not bring on the "muttered threats" from MACV that might have been made in earlier

years.<sup>42</sup> Public affairs officers were allowing reporters to continue their investigations without official response. The consensus in Saigon was that any response from the military would only maintain reporters' interest in the story.

During Laotian operations, heavy losses occurred in helicopters. MACV decided to hide behind bureaucracy to protect itself from criticism by reporters. Public affairs officers announced that aircraft were damaged instead of destroyed by the enemy. These official statements were hiding the true extent of the damage because official rules stated that an aircraft was not officially "destroyed" until a clerk processed the paperwork. By withholding the paperwork, MACV was able to officially downplay the results of the battle. The intent, as revealed by Walter Cronkite, was that they would then be able to release additional losses over time, to generate less interest. The initial report stated that only 109 helicopters were lost and 500 damaged. CBS found out that more than 200 of the 'damaged' helicopters would never fly again.<sup>43</sup>

Reporters recognized that the Army was clearly trying to minimize the impact of the war. Donald Kirk wrote, "Specifically ordered to hold down casualties, commanders rarely invade traditional enemy base areas among shadowy crags and valleys to the west and carefully disengage from battles in the lowlands if heavy losses seem inevitable or even conceivable."<sup>44</sup> The low key approach emphasized the gap between the military and the media towards the end of the war. The *New York Times* reporter, Sydney Schanberg aptly summarized where military and media relations had gone:

News stories from Saigon almost never use the word 'lie' about American press releases and reports – perhaps because of the need for coexistence and because safer words will get the point across. But there is no other word for some of the stories that the Americans put out. An example is an increase in bombing raids between 8 Nov 71 and 8 Mar 72. MACV explained it by saying the weather

had improved, however reporters found that General Larelle had been conducting unauthorized raids into North Vietnam, for which he was relieved of command and demoted. This was only one of almost daily occurrences of distortions and omissions of fact--a policy which stems more from embarrassment than means of military security.<sup>45</sup>

#### News Embargoes, January 1971

If General Abrams was disposed to do as little as possible to assist reporters, he still understood that overt attempts to cut out the press from what was happening would result in speculation far more damaging than a loss of operational security. He therefore attempted to embargo all news reports. MACV believed allowing reporters to record the details of military operations while requiring them not to publish stories until after an operation would prevent enemy forces from learning useful information. The buildup towards the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos seemed a perfect time to implement this new policy. Fearing that the news of an embargo would give away secrets, MACV placed an embargo on news of the embargo.<sup>46</sup> Public affairs officers speculated that reporters would prefer to be given wider access to information but prohibited from publishing it until after the operation. This concept relied on the military and media to concur on the necessity of security, which they clearly did not.

The news embargo policy was doomed from its inception. MACV had continually proven unable to prevent internal leaks of classified and sensitive information to reporters. By this point in the war, reporters did not believe that MACV would revoke accreditation for revealing prohibited information. Reporters refused to believe that there was a convincing military necessity for an embargo, while MACV could not believe that a few days delay before publication distracted from the public's right to know of the



operation. It was a perfect example of the problem that confronted both institutions: military security versus the public's right to know.<sup>47</sup>

Newspapers across the country were disturbed by the embargo policy. They believed that signs of an invasion of Laos were obvious to the North Vietnamese and there was no military necessity for secrecy. The *St. Louis Dispatch* called MACV's actions "a disgusting piece of business"<sup>48</sup> while the *Chicago Daily News* thought that they were "blindfolding the public."<sup>49</sup> Reporters were angry. The movement of troops towards the border was obvious throughout Military Region 1. In their mind, it had been for weeks. In their opinion, there was no way that enemy spies had failed to see so blatant a move.<sup>50</sup> Reporters viewed the embargo policy as a method for the military to conceal large-scale military operations from public scrutiny until after they were completed.

The embargo was first broken on 31 January 1971, when reporters not subject to MACV press guidelines published it in the London newspapers. These stories were immediately followed by a story in *The New York Times*. The *Times* reasoned that since the story was already in print, it should not be subject to embargo. By the first of February, the embargo had almost completely collapsed. The *Washington Post* reported that a large operation was imminent, but being blacked out by MACV.<sup>51</sup> Other papers announced that military operations were being held in a "shroud of secrecy."<sup>52</sup> It was clear that even without official reports or acknowledgements, reporters saw that something big was in the works in Laos.<sup>53</sup> The refusal to fully disclose operations in Laos failed to hide the mission and only succeeded in further alienating reporters from the military.

### Summary

It is important to note that the low-key approach met with more success than other public affairs policies enacted during Vietnam. MACV had failed to convince reporters about the success of Vietnamization by placing unrealistic optimism on the success of South Vietnamese forces. Though improvements had been made, the official position on their abilities could never be obtained. Attempts to embargo news also failed miserably, as technology and communications methods had bypassed the military's ability to contain them.

American forces continued to be released from duty in Vietnam until the final US combat forces were withdrawn on 23 March 1973. Public affairs policy remained largely unchanged after January 1971, as Washington policy makers became more concerned about ending America's involvement in the war than continuing to justify itself to the media.

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<sup>1</sup>William M. Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1996), 17.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Arnett, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 133.

<sup>3</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 271.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Mohr, "Field Checks in Vietnam Show Allies Understated Foes Gains," *New York Times*, 13 March 1969.

<sup>6</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 69.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 184.

- <sup>10</sup>“In Vietnam: Mamasan Pushers vs Psyops,” *Newsweek* 21 April 1969, 37.
- <sup>11</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 114.
- <sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.
- <sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 98.
- <sup>14</sup>Peter Arnett, *Live from the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad, 35 Years in the World's War Zones* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 260.
- <sup>15</sup>Ayers Drummond Jr., “The lull raises tricky questions about troop withdrawals,” *New York Times*, 13 July 1969.
- <sup>16</sup>“Hold your Breath,” *Newsweek*, 14 July 1969, 41.
- <sup>17</sup>Peter Jesser and Peter R. Young, *The Military and the Media: From the Crimea to Desert Strike* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 92.
- <sup>18</sup>Philip D. Chinnery, *Vietnam: The Helicopter War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 157.
- <sup>19</sup>John Tolson, *Airmobility, 1961-1971* (Washington, DC: US Army, 1973), 240.
- <sup>20</sup>“Reporters Virtually Stymied in Attempts to Cover Laotian Campaign,” *Time*, 8 March 1971, 42.
- <sup>21</sup>Gloria Emmerson, “Spirit of Siagon's Army Shaken in Laos,” *New York Times*, 28 March 1971.
- <sup>22</sup>Charles W Corddry, “Press Misled on Section of Pipeline Seized in Laos,” *Baltimore Sun*, 5 March 1971.
- <sup>23</sup>“The Withdrawal from Laos,” *Boston Globe*, 23 March 1971.
- <sup>24</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 447.
- <sup>25</sup>Jeffrey J. Clarke, *US Army in Vietnam Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 444.
- <sup>26</sup>Craig Whitney, “Saigon's Cambodia Drive in Confusion After the Death of its Colorful Commander,” *New York Times*, 2 March 1971.
- <sup>27</sup>Peter R. Kann, “A Long Leisurely Drive Through Mekong Delta Tells Much of the War,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 November 1969.

<sup>28</sup>“State of the War: An Intelligence Report,” *US News and World Report*, 27 October 1969, 36.

<sup>29</sup>Kann, “A Long Leisurely Drive through Mekong Delta Tells Much of the War.”

<sup>30</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 449.

<sup>31</sup>“State of the War: An intelligence report,” *US News and World Report*, 27 October 1969, 36.

<sup>32</sup>John E. Woodruff, “US Evaluation Shows Saigon Forces Decline in Combat Efficiency,” *Baltimore Sun*, 29 October 1969.

<sup>33</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 19.

<sup>34</sup>Sydney H. Schanberg, *Reporting Vietnam, Part Two: American Journalism, 1969-1975* (New York: Library of America), 394.

<sup>35</sup>Robert Elegant, “Vietnam War Briefings Swing to Quiet Candor,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 February 1969.

<sup>36</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 40.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>38</sup>Schanberg, *Reporting Vietnam, Part Two*, 397.

<sup>39</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 58.

<sup>40</sup>James S. Olson, and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 22.

<sup>41</sup>Seymour M. Hersh, “How I broke the My Lai Story,” *Saturday Review*, 11 July 1970, 46.

<sup>42</sup>Arnett, *Vietnam Reconsidered*, 133.

<sup>43</sup>Walter Cronkite, *CBS Evening News*, 9 April 1971.

<sup>44</sup>Donald Kirk, *Reporting Vietnam, Part Two: American Journalism, 1969-1975* (New York: Library of America), 217.

<sup>45</sup>Schanberg, *Reporting Vietnam, Part Two*, 398.

<sup>46</sup>Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 408.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 421

<sup>48</sup>“Concealing the Facts on Laos,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 3 February 1971.

<sup>49</sup>“Blindfolding the Public,” *Chicago Daily News*, 3 February 1971.

<sup>50</sup>Ralph Blumenthal, “US News Blackout in Saigon tried to keep even its existence secret,” *New York Times*, 5 February 1971.

<sup>51</sup>“News Blackout Continues in Indochina,” *Washington Post*, 1 February 1971.

<sup>52</sup>“Viet Moves Shrouded in Secrecy,” *Baltimore Sun*, 1 February 1971.

<sup>53</sup>“Some daylight on the blackout,” *Washington Daily News*, 4 February 1971.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Three American officers aptly summed up the lessons that can be gleaned from the public affairs operations during the Vietnam War. Each of the officers had a unique viewpoint on the relationship, and their words can be taken to heart still today. First, General William T. Sherman stated, “I hate newspapermen. They come into camp and pick up camp rumors and print them as facts. I regard them as spies, which in truth, they are.”

Sherman was partially correct about reporters. They are spies for the American public and relate back their truth to their readers and viewers, yet modern officers should not hold as much animosity as Sherman had. This symbiotic relationship, between the military’s duty to secure the nation and the media’s ability to ensure that the military does not exceed its constitutional authorities, is a foundation of American society. Despite some inevitable advocacy journalism and breaches of security, it is an essential task that they perform. They collect their raw intelligence and send it to a public who can be both supportive and skeptical. It is important to remember that it is not the job of the military to influence public opinion; rather that job should be left to politicians.

Second, General William Westmoreland said, “Vietnam was the first war ever fought without any censorship. Without censorship, things can get terribly confused in the public mind.” Westmoreland’s idea can be carried one step further for future conflicts. No longer will censorship on the battlefield be possible. American soldiers must realize that their actions will be subject to scrutiny at all times – even times when the confusion of battle exists. It is the job of public affairs to provide some perspective of

the confusion that reigns in the public's mind. The best way to accomplish this task is with the cooperation of reporters. Spokesmen must be able to earn the trust of reporters in order to assist and have them accept the context under which military operations are conducted. Only by telling the truth, the whole truth, can this trust be sufficiently gained and maintained.

Third, General Creighton W. Abrams, Jr. stated, "While we are guarding the country, we must accept being the guardian of the finest ethics. The country needs it and we must do it." Ethics refer to the principles, rules, and standards of proper conduct defined by an organization or profession, in this case the United States Army, for the regulation of its own members. The Army has identified its values as the standards of conduct that all Soldiers should uphold -- Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal Courage. All Soldiers have a duty to provide truthful information to the public so the public can make informed decisions in accordance with the Constitution. At the same time, individual integrity must guide them to remain truthful as they relate information that does not risk security to that public.

### Results of Changing Military Media Policies

The military and media relationship in Vietnam was very complex. Reporters and public affairs officers from MACV worked closely together over an extended period to refine and develop policies and procedures about how and when information was distributed. Unfortunately, changes in policy dictated the messages and context within which information became available.

During the initial stages of American intervention in Vietnam, the State Department, through Cable 1006, attempted to synchronize how the military would

interact with reporters. The Cable's origin within diplomatic channels belied its significance; namely, military forces needed to respect and portray US intervention as subservient to the host country involved in the operation. Yet two important points were missed. First, actions speak louder than words. American statements spoke of assistance and support, yet the issuance of US press cards that were vital and Vietnamese press cards that were superfluous created a different perception. Second, American reporters naturally wanted to focus their stories on American soldiers. Efforts to downplay US participation are futile when reporters are creating stories that their American audiences will want to read. This same problem will continue to cause some similar problems in Iraq as US leaders attempt to show Iraqi forces taking the lead during security operations.

Refusing to acknowledge facts discovered by reporters did not assist MACV in accomplishing its mission. Peter Arnett's exposure of the use of tear gas taught a valuable lesson by refusing to tackle the problem head on. Public affairs officers allowed one reporter's speculation to shape public perception in a negative manner. The issue's lack of context, which an empowered public affairs representative could have easily provided, colored the story against a useful and humane tactical weapon. In the same manner, denying or failing to comment on known information is also dangerous. By refusing to acknowledge the Shrike missile and other weapons that reporters had seen demonstrated in combat, MACV did not succeed in preventing their disclosure.

Reporters had access to information from first hand accounts as well as communist sources, which consisted mainly of propaganda. Without authoritative information to publish, the media used whatever information it could find to get the story out, to the detriment of the military. In the current operating environment, military



personnel should expect this problem to increase as the amount of information available to reporters also increases. Many of these sources, especially from the World Wide Web, may not be accurate or authoritative. The American military must react faster to, and anticipate better, media coverage in the future.

One tactic that MACV attempted to use during Vietnam was acknowledging events and labeling them as isolated incidents in order to focus attention away from the increasing American role in the war. During the battle at the A Shau Special Forces camp, public affairs spokesmen intentionally downplayed the attack, trying to focus media attention onto the bigger picture, as few other combat actions were occurring at that time. This tactic failed for two reasons. First, only so many incidents can occur before they are no longer “isolated.” In Vietnam, incidents similar to the A Shau battle were happening too frequently to be dismissed as isolated. Second, as a moth is drawn to a flame, reporters are naturally attracted to any story developing in their area. Precisely because the environment was not overwhelmed with combat, reporters were able to concentrate on one event. It is not useful for military public affairs officers to trivialize any aspect of the operation, as future circumstances can change an event’s importance.

Military leaders must never attempt to gloss over the conduct of their operations. The demonstration of the congressional delegations drive down Vietnam’s Route 1 was a dangerous and foolish event. Though it did make an immediate and temporary boost in the favorable opinion of the situation, reporters who stayed and investigated the actions on the ground quickly exposed the charade. Future military leaders may be able to fool reporters for short periods of time, but any sustained deception is very likely to be discovered. The long-term negative impact on the military and media relationship from

these deceptions is never worth the short-term boost to the assessment of the operation they may provide.

General Abrams attempted to ignore reporters and focus his attention on military operations. However, the number of reporters in theater made this impossible. Reporters were everywhere and were actively seeking stories to publish. Significant combat events, such as the attack on Chu Chi, produced sensational news stories that were subsequently ignored by MACV. Ignoring the problem resulted in the perception by reporters that the military was attempting to hide unsavory details about the event. Commanders must realize that reporters, especially during the early stages of a conflict, will be present in ever-increasing numbers. Ignoring them and their investigations will not make them go away, it will usually make them dig harder and deeper.

The greatest lesson to be gained from Vietnamization was to be careful for what you ask for. By focusing reporters on the improvements in the ARVN units, MACV also directed reporters towards the flaws in their military. Actions at Ben Hut exemplified this. By attempting to play up the successful defense of the base, MACV public affairs officers inadvertently exposed weaknesses within the combat support elements of the ARVN. Vietnamization had raised expectations of success to such a high level that continuing to meet those expectations could not be maintained. This effect has been repeated recently in Iraq, as early improvements in measures of effectiveness such as number of Iraqi units reaching self-sufficiency, became a significant media problem when some units suffered temporary setbacks. These setbacks created an impression within the media that the overall policy was failing.

Vietnam provided many striking illustrations of MACV trying to hide information from reporters. An example was the secret raids into Cambodia in 1969. The *New York Times* soon published a detailed account of the actions.<sup>1</sup> The efforts to hide these actions failed for many reasons. First, reporters were omnipresent. It was impossible to hide activities from them. Second, disgruntled military personnel provided information to reporters. This may have come from personal disapproval of operations and the war, or from an internal belief that the public should hear about the exploits of its Soldiers. Inter-service rivalry also impacted this desire to inform the public. Lastly, the enemy always has a vote on any military activity. During Vietnam, communist radio sources continually announced military operations as they occurred. With the expansion of the communications means and methods, there is no reason to believe that future enemies will not take advantage of them and repeat this tactic.

During the Tet Offensive, reporters provided some of the most compelling coverage of the war. Much of that reporting turned out to be incorrect, but the tone and content of it changed the course of the war. At the time of the battle, both an American military police captain and a sergeant at the scene told reporters that the VC had penetrated the embassy building. The reporters got it wrong because the MPs had it wrong. It was unfortunate, understandable and human. The point is that reporters' work can only be as accurate as their sources of information.<sup>2</sup> This position has been amplified by the quickened pace of the American news cycle along with the decreased attention span of the public. Reporters are required to get the story immediately, get the news out, and move on to the next story. Often, they will find their sources in the heat of the moment and at the lowest tactical levels. It is very important to develop relationships

with reporters to help them understand the dynamics of battle and interpret events correctly. During Vietnam, reporters lost faith with MACV's public affairs personnel. We must ensure that this does not happen in future operations.

After publishing one combat story, Peter Arnett was called into the office of Major General John Norton, 1st Cavalry Division commander. The general produced a copy of the hometown paper of the division with the Associated Press story on their tactics of battling the Viet Cong and derided the report. "I protested that my story was not inaccurate. 'Accuracy is not the point, you've scared the shit out of the folks back home and I won't have it' Norton replied. I stated the obvious, that the bait strategy did risk people's lives, but the general did not want to discuss it."<sup>3</sup> Officers in Vietnam questioned reporters' patriotism by their failure to support the official military position. There is no reason to expect that they will behave differently in the future. A significant distinction must be made between reporting the facts of military operations and providing opinions about them. The military must be prepared for criticism of its techniques and procedures.

During Vietnam, reporters found themselves accepted by the men and women of the armed forces. Even one as controversial as Peter Arnett, who noted "I found, too, that despite my odd garb and my inexperience, the Vietnamese soldiers in the field, and their American advisors with them, were quick to friendship and always helpful. I found that no briefing back at headquarters could compensate for the drama of actually being in the field of struggle."<sup>4</sup> Soldiers have always accepted and supported reporters in their midst, and this will most likely continue. Individual Soldiers desire to get their story out to the

American people and their loved ones, and this has always facilitated communications of events and details on operations to reporters.

The overriding conclusion emerging from an examination of Vietnam media policy is that during limited conflicts, the government and the military are virtually powerless to shape reporting. The military must attempt to present events within their context so that the public can understand the whole situation, and not attempt to hide or downplay any adverse situations. The media is free to report the truth as it sees it on the battlefield. Keeping both of these statements in mind, military personnel should remember that it is not the responsibility of soldiers to defend and explain political policy.<sup>5</sup>

With America's current military and economic prosperity, the public is free to make up their minds unconstrained by considerations of personal or national survival issues and will rely on the truth that they perceive as accurate, from media and other information sources, to make decisions. The military is not, and should not, be involved in shaping the public's decision to commit itself to operations. It is not in the best interest of the American military to become involved in any campaign to artificially increase optimism with respect to current operations, as time after time during Vietnam, those campaigns invariably backfired.

#### How to Apply the Lessons from Vietnam to Today

The President and his civilian advisors, with input from military professionals, dictate policy and strategic goals to the armed forces. The Vietnam era military policy makers not only failed to set objectives, they also deliberately excluded the American public from the strategic equation. Some of these policy makers went so far as to say that

military strategies ought to be pursued even when the American public opposed them.<sup>6</sup> Military operations can commence and proceed without the support of the population, as long as they remain short in duration. The problem starts when a conflict becomes protracted. Wars cannot be sustained indefinitely in democratic societies without popular support. Politicians are held accountable. American civilian leaders set policy goals and ultimately answer for them with voters. Military leaders should not become entangled in the justification of policy objectives. When they do, it invariably leads to a conflict between truth and goals.

When public affairs spokesmen attempt to support policy by manipulating operational information, it leads to conflict. Amongst the press corps in Vietnam, there were some correspondents who were experienced in warfare (including a number of former military men). These men did not rely on the five o'clock follies for their information but instead went up-country to see for themselves what was happening. It was these correspondents who very quickly exposed some of the bogus "facts" produced in Saigon. For instance, many reporters were suspicious of body count figures given out at daily briefings. Figures were obviously exaggerated and they were proven to be so in cases where journalists tried to actually verify them.<sup>7</sup> As a result, reporters lost faith in official information and treated all information issued as suspect. In the future, the military must refrain from manipulating information, as it damages its ability to pass on factual information to the public later.

Once the trust of reporters is lost, it can take many years to restore that trust. CBS news reported on 11 July 1983, "It was not a stab in the back by an unpatriotic press that lost the war, but rather the failure of the US military to tell the government and the public

what was wrong with the war.” Even after so many years, reporters failed to reveal the fate of General George H. Decker, the Chief of Staff of the Army, and Admiral George W. Anderson Jr., the Chief of Naval Operations, when they did attempt to warn the nation. Both of these leaders were simply replaced by officers more agreeable to the civilian leadership’s viewpoints. The media also did not heed the warnings given by Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson that it would take ten years and a million troops to win in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Reporters today are using the argument that military officers failed to warn the nation about the Iraq war. They fail to remember that just prior to the entry of American forces, Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki warned that it would take large numbers of troops many years to secure the peace, and that he was quickly marginalized by the political establishment. Numerous optimistic reports emanating from Iraq have begun to once again resemble Vietnam. Military officials must remain vigilant to not repeat the mistakes of the past, lest they see a repeat in the media’s view of the “failure of the US military.” It is essential to rely on the truth and let the nation debate that truth.

*New Yorker* journalist Michael Arlen stated, “I realize now that cameras see differently from those men and women and with a different logic, certainly different from print journalism. A film narrative makes a different impact than other narratives. I do not think that can ever be changed, except superficially. My point is that we should not expect it to change.”<sup>9</sup> This is of critical importance today. Military leaders today must accept the presence of reporters and never rely on the hope that they will stay away from operations. Failing to establish a workable plan to cope with reporters’ presence on the

battlefield does not relieve military professionals from their responsibility to interact with them.

Barry Zorthian, the former chief of information in South Vietnam, identified many challenges involved in his dealings with reporters in Vietnam. His many years of experience left him with many insights into this difficult relationship. He had five specific recommendations and conclusions on military media relations (figure 4).

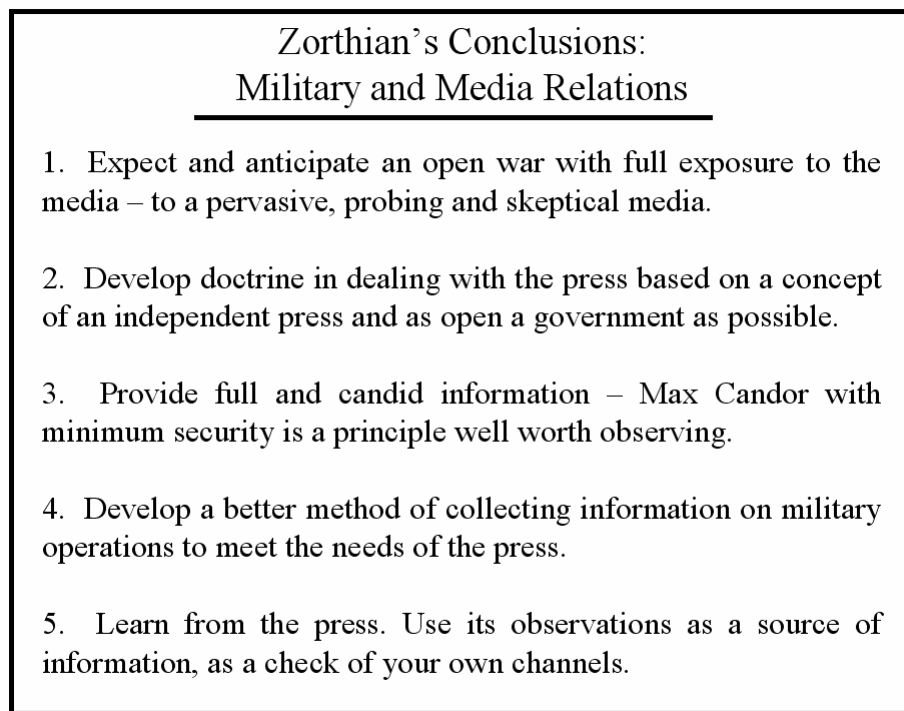


Figure 4. Zorthian's Media Conclusions

Source: William M. Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1996), 245.

Sometimes reporters can not miss the absurdity of statements made during combat. However, when printing such statements, reporters sometimes fail to explain the



wider context within which the statements were made. “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it” became a buzz phrase for the antiwar movement, and reporters were blamed for fanning the opposition.<sup>10</sup> However, after reflecting on its truth, military officers were just as perplexed, because tactically, it was accurate. Reporters are supposed to relate the facts, in an objective and full context, and let the public decide if the results are worth their associated costs.

MACV identified the dilemmas faced by the military in war in its 1968 Command History: “Two collateral controversies have simmered side by side during the war in Vietnam; what to do about the war itself and what to do about the news coverage of the war. With every newspaper and magazine, every network television news program, and almost every radio newscast giving the American people the closest thing to real time news of the war, there had never in the history of warfare been so much current information about a conflict.”<sup>11</sup> Today, that expansion of news coverage has increased many times over. With the advent of the 24-hour news stations and the Internet, there is a continuous requirement for more information. More reporters with better access and more capable reporting methods, such as satellite videophones, will continue to cover the battlefield.

As a result of Vietnam, the military has a heightened awareness that civilian officials are responsive to influences other than the objective, military conditions on the battlefield.<sup>12</sup> It is critical that we remember that reporters have two purposes. First, they need to inform the public about what they perceive is happening. Second, they must make money on the stories that they distribute to the public. With the vast increase in the numbers and channels of news distribution, this requirement to produce news that sells

has increased. Military forces must be prepared to accept that some reporters may utilize improper methods, such as reporting sensitive information and falsifying stories, and not hold the entire profession responsible for the actions of a small percentage, or suffer the consequences of their alienation.

Commanders must understand public affairs and its operations. OIF demonstrated that reporters have the ability to saturate the environment. Cameras are everywhere on the battlefield and information captured, no matter how sensitive or disturbing, will make it to the public eventually. During Vietnam, spokesmen distributed information that was not sufficiently verified and later proved incorrect. It is essential that future commanders verify information before it is disseminated, to avoid any appearance of impropriety. Developing trust and mutual understanding before a war will greatly enhance the military's ability to influence reporters' decisions. The pools initiated during OIF went a long way to bridging the gap, but the Army must remain vigilant. Once credibility is lost, it is difficult to regain.

Any attempt to suppress news ultimately fails because communications methods have become too decentralized. Military censorship is no longer possible. Reporters can now broadcast in real time from anywhere on the battlefield using satellite video-phones. Extensive training with reporters accompanying forces must be conducted to ensure operational security is maintained. During Vietnam, reporters entering the country could report immediately, without any preparatory training. This led to conflicts and misunderstandings with US forces, especially after the development of the 'let-them-see-for-themselves' media policy. It is in the better interest of the military to communicate

with reporters and assist them in seeing the true context of the operation, lest they misinterpret what they see of the war.

President Lyndon Johnson stated, “It is the common failing of totalitarian regimes that they cannot really understand the nature of our democracy. They mistake dissent for disloyalty. They mistake restlessness for a rejection of policy. They mistake a few committees for a country. They misjudge individual speeches for public policy.”<sup>13</sup>

Military officers need to keep in consideration the purpose of media coverage during war. Negative coverage certainly does affect the support of the public. Unfortunately, it is an inherent right of dissenters within the country to support those opinions. Leaders should not question reporters’ loyalty, but work with them to give them a better understanding of the situation and context for military actions. History has shown that other methods of deceit, or attempts to “handle” the press, have only driven reporters further away.

### Current Military Doctrine

US Army Public Affairs is currently a functional area assigned to officers from different basic branches in the Army. Assigned officers receive a specialized nine-week long course taught at the Defense Information School at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana. Additionally, they have the ability to attend the Advanced Public Affairs Course for ten weeks if selected for higher-level assignments. These two courses create a foundation for command information operations throughout the Army, assigned at division level and higher organizations.

Public Affairs officers are trained in current Army methodology. Army field manual 46-1 states, “Commanders need to understand that the perception of America’s Army and how it conducts its operations can be as important to the Army’s success as

actual combat.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, “The active Army, U.S. Army Reserve and Army National Guard have an obligation to keep the American people, its internal audiences and other key publics informed about its achievements and successes, as well as its problems and failures.”<sup>15</sup> It is clear that the stated Army position has not changed since the Vietnam War. It is still obligatory to be candid and truthful with the public.

This is reflected by the current Army regulation, AR360-1; “Public affairs fulfills the Army’s obligation to keep the American people and the Army informed and helps to establish the conditions that lead to confidence in America’s Army and its readiness to conduct operations in peacetime, conflict or war.”<sup>16</sup> It goes on to state, “The Army public affairs mission is to promote awareness, understanding, and support Army activities and programs. Its primary audience is the American public, its Soldiers, civilian employees and the communities it serves.”<sup>17</sup> Both by regulation and doctrine, the Army has seen the importance of public affairs towards the success of its mission.

In executing public affairs operations, the Army must be vigilant to prevent information fratricide. FM 3-13 defines information fratricide as the “result of employing information operations elements in a way that causes effects in the information environment that impede the conduct of friendly operations or adversely affect friendly forces.”<sup>18</sup> The issuance of false or misleading information or the intentional omission of information to mislead can easily be included as information fratricide and must be avoided, as its inevitable discovery by reporters definitely has adverse effects on friendly forces.

Additionally, current public affairs activities must be closely monitored to avoid any connection with information warfare directed against non-American elements. Table 1 shows how current public affairs are separate but supporting information operations.

Table 1. How Public Affairs Fits

Information Operations Unity of Effort			
	C2W	CIVIL AFFAIRS	PUBLIC AFFAIRS
<b>COMMAND AND CONTROL WARFARE (C2W)</b> supports by:		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Influencing/informing populace of CA activities and support</li> <li>•Neutralizing disinformation and hostile propaganda directed against civil authorities</li> <li>•Controlling EMS for legitimate communications purposes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Conducting counter-propaganda and protecting from misinformation and rumor</li> <li>•Developing EEFI to preclude inadvertent public disclosure</li> <li>•Synchronizing PSYOP and OPSEC with PA strategy</li> </ul>
<b>CIVIL AFFAIRS</b> supports by:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Providing information to support information infrastructure picture</li> <li>•Synchronizing communications media and messages with PSYOP</li> <li>•Coordinating C2 target sets with target cell</li> <li>•Establishing and maintaining liaison and dialogue with local civilians, NGOs and PVOs</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Providing information on CMOC activities to support PA strategy</li> <li>•Synchronizing information, communications media and messages.</li> <li>•Identifying and integrating media and public information from host nation sources</li> </ul>
<b>PUBLIC AFFAIRS</b> supports by:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Developing information products to protect soldiers against the effects of disinformation or misinformation.</li> <li>•Coordinating with PSYOP planners to ensure consistent messages and maintenance of OPSEC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Providing accurate, timely and balanced information to the public.</li> <li>•Coordinating with CA to verify facts and validity of information</li> </ul>	

Source: US Army, FM 46-1, *Public Affairs Operations* (Washington, DC: US Army, 1993), 11.

### Recommendations for Future Operations

The US Army must hold to its stated principles in public affairs operations. Honesty and candor within the limits of operational security are the only ways to maintain credibility with reporters. Military officials must clearly delineate between information operations targeted outside the American establishment and public affairs executed within it. Policy justification and support should be executed within the civilian defense establishment, while military channels stay involved in operational execution and reporting.

The Army has established specialized branches to enable it to train and maintain proficiency in certain subject areas, such as legal, medical, etc. It is time to establish a permanent specialized public affairs branch within the US Army. The Air Force has successfully implemented such a program.

The USAF has the 35PX -- Public Affairs accessions program to provide trained and ready command information specialists who are recruited and trained out of school. These officers analyze military missions, unit policies, and relationships with the population of local communities to determine requirements for communication. They develop working relationships with media representatives and also develop and maintain liaison with representatives of civilian organizations, governmental agencies, reserve and active duty units, and foreign publics.

A dedicated branch would allow officers to assess and develop into functional specialists who can efficiently interact with reporters. It would enable systemic cross-fertilization with the civilian journalists in America. Currently, there is a dearth of military experience in the media, and developing a steady stream of junior officers who

leave the military after their initial obligation and take jobs in the private sector can increase it. This is especially critical in the opening phases of conflicts when forces are rapidly introduced into theater and it is very difficult to provide a clear picture to reporters covering the story.

By placing a branch dedicated personal staff officer at the brigade combat team level, the commander would be more effective at ensuring emphasis is placed on this essential task. Additionally, this placement would allow newly commissioned public affairs officers the opportunity to gain experience in ground operations at the lowest levels, something General Westmoreland identified as crucial to credibility.

The concept of strategic effects by individuals on the battlefield will continue to grow. Military commanders have much less control over the actions of individual reporters. They will continue to capture the actions of individuals for better or for worse whenever they occur. Commanders must integrate public affairs training and understanding into their operations to be successful.

It is no longer acceptable for Soldiers to respond, “I am well trained to perform my mission” when asked about their preparation for operations. Embedded reporters make this even more important. If individuals are not clear as to why they are performing their tasks, they can easily produce incorrect and damaging statements that put the Army into a poor light.

### Conclusion

Military and media relations suffered greatly during the Vietnam War. Numerous academic and military professionals have weighed in on the meaning of lessons that can be drawn from the operations and interactions that occurred during the conflict. However,

the challenge facing today's military professionals is to ensure that these lessons are not relegated to libraries and bookshelves. The advent of high technology communications systems guarantees that reporters will be able to cover future operations with more rapidity and visibility than ever before. Therefore, active and pre-planned measures must be taken to communicate with these reporters in order to effectively convey the true picture of the Army as it executes its mission.

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<sup>1</sup>William Beecher, "Raids in Cambodia by US Unprotected," *New York Times*, 9 May 1969.

<sup>2</sup>John Laurence, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 176.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Arnett, *Live from the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad, 35 Years in the World's War Zones* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 204.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Jesser and Peter R. Young, *The Media and the Military: From the Crimea to Desert Strike* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 94.

<sup>6</sup>Lloyd J. Matthews and Brown D. E. eds., *Assessing the Vietnam War* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1987), 38.

<sup>7</sup>Alan Hooper, *The Military and the Media* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Gower, 1982), 112.

<sup>8</sup>William V. Kennedy, *The Military and the Media: Why the Press Cannot be Trusted to Cover a War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 111.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Arlen, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, comp. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 104.

<sup>10</sup>Arnett, *Live from the Battlefield*, 256.

<sup>11</sup>US Army, *MACV Command History 1968* (Saigon, Vietnam: US Army, 1969), 953.

<sup>12</sup>David A. Patraeus, *Assessing the Vietnam War*, ed. Lloyd J. Matthews and Dale E. Brown (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1987), 174.



<sup>13</sup>James B. Simpson, *Simpson's Contemporary Quotations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 146.

<sup>14</sup>US Army, FM 46-1, *Public Affairs Operations* (Washington, DC: US Army, 1993), 12.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>16</sup>US Army, AR360-1, *The Army Public Affairs Program* (Washington, DC: US Army, 2000), 1.

<sup>17</sup>US Army, DA PAM 600-3-46, *Public Affairs* (Washington, DC: US Army, 1987), 1.

<sup>18</sup>US Army, FM 3-13, *Information Operation: Doctrine, Tactics Techniques and Procedures* (Washington, DC: US Army, 2003), 1.

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